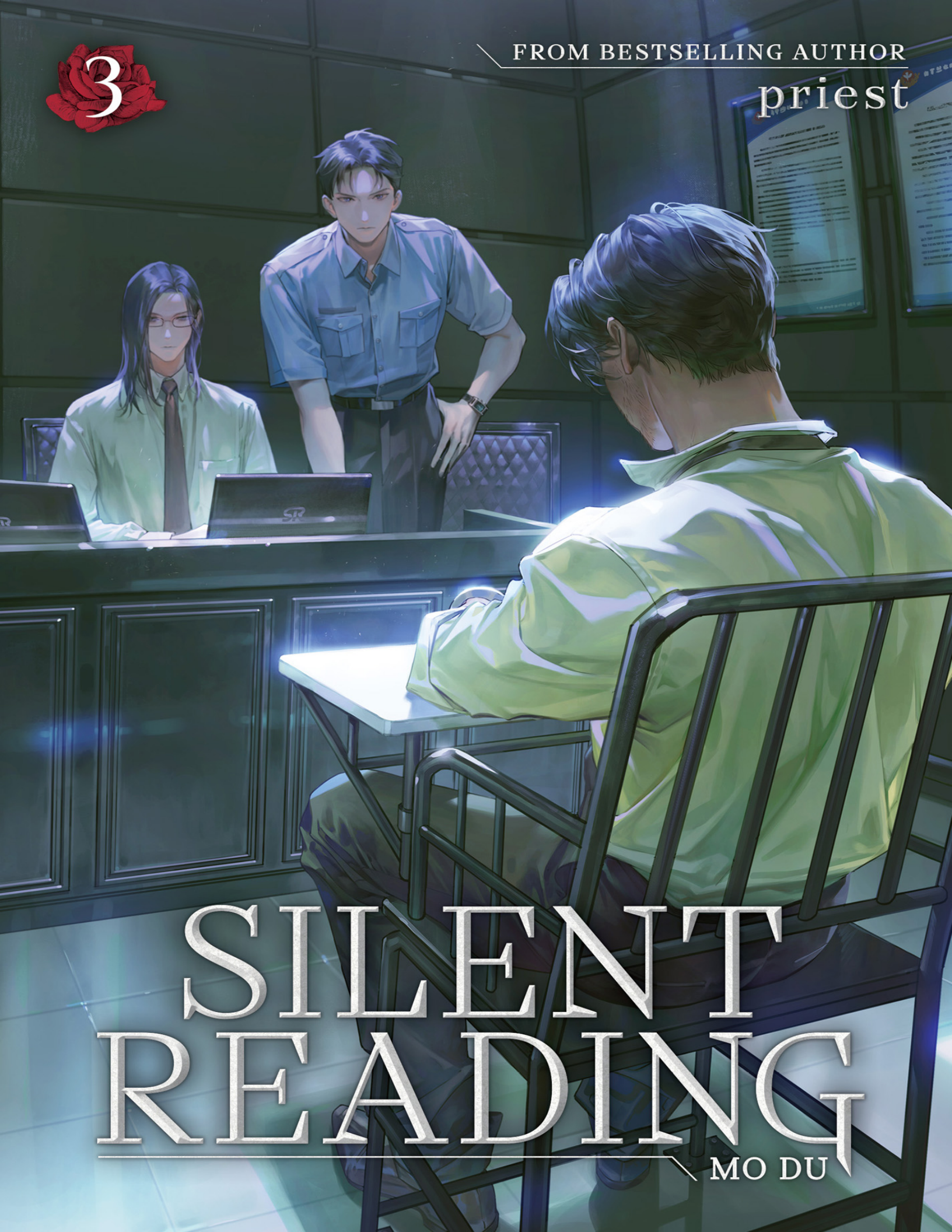
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FROM BESTSELLING AUTHOR
priest
SILENT READING
MO DU

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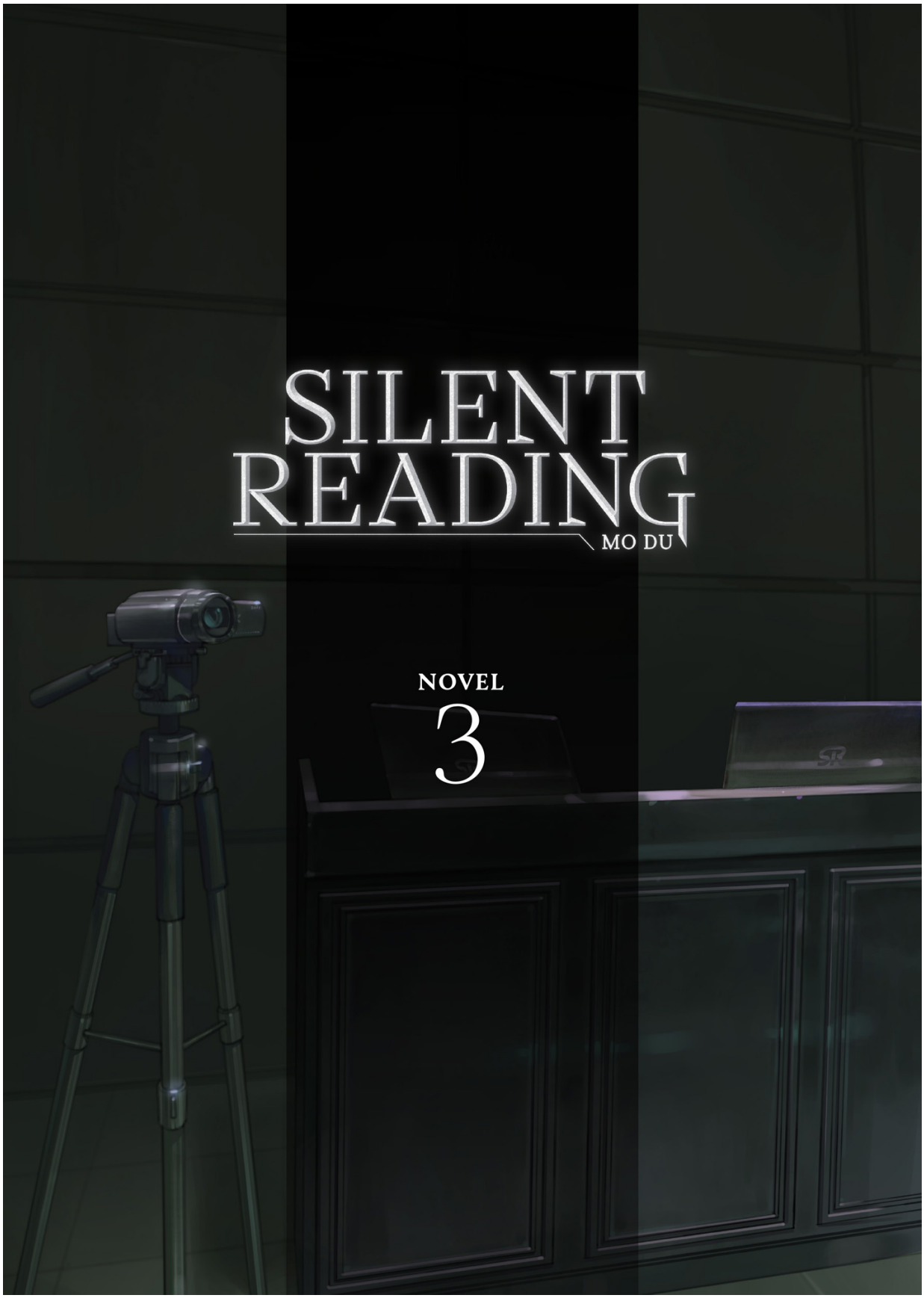
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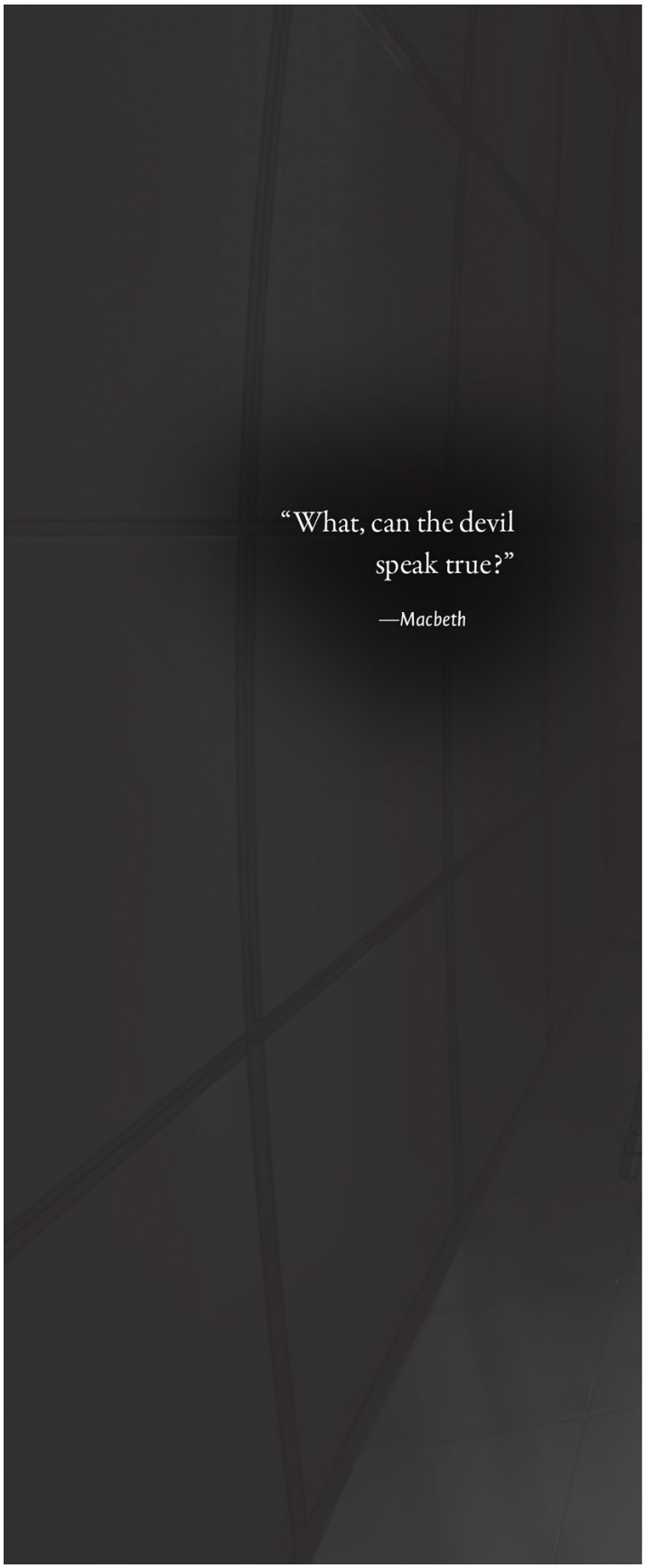
“What, can the devil
speak true?”
—Macbeth

Chapter 1

SERGEANT LUO SWAGGERED into the office exactly on time, one hand holding a bag that contained a dozen breakfast takeout boxes. The moment he opened the door, he was greeted by the sight of several of his colleagues shifting their desks around.

"What's going on?" he asked.

Tao Ran popped out. "Director Zeng just came in and told us a new teammate is reporting for duty today," he replied. "We're finding them a place to sit."

"Oh, right. Now I remember." Luo Wenzhou set breakfast on the table and gestured for them to help themselves. "Their transfer notice came ages ago—I forgot about it when things got busy. You all know him; it's Little Four-Eyes from the bureau in Huashi. He did a good job when we were investigating Wang Hongliang, and he has a good head on his shoulders, so I requested that he be transferred."

Tao Ran blinked. "Xiao Haiyang?"

Just then, someone stuck their head in through the office door. "Sergeant Luo! Director Zeng wants you!"

Luo Wenzhou made a noise of acknowledgment and picked up a disposable cup of savory tofu pudding. He stabbed a thumb-width straw into it and stirred, then slurped it up as he walked to Director Zeng's office. The pudding was gone by the time he reached the office door. Aiming for the trash can six feet away, he took a freehanded long shot, and the plastic cup landed in the basket with a clang.

Opening the office door from within, Zeng Guangling pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose and regarded Luo Wenzhou coolly. "The NBA's missing another Curry."

Zeng Guangling had specialized in forensics at the beginning of his career, but due to old Director General Zhang's admiration of Zeng's impeccable professionalism and meticulous work ethic, he'd been unwillingly promoted into a managerial position and saddled with all kinds

of random ad hoc tasks. One day he might be in charge of organizing the upcoming democratic life meeting,[1] the next with issuing a public statement, and the day after that with handling admin for HR. The director general worked hard to pave Director Zeng's way with useful experience—experience that made Director Zeng, a forensics geek, long for the sweet release of death. He fantasized every day about quitting his job, and his treatment of others was ice-cold.

When Luo Wenzhou started at the municipal bureau, he had often followed Zeng Guangling to crime scenes. Zeng Guangling was meticulous by nature, and the very sight of the little rascal had rubbed him the wrong way. He'd upbraided Luo Wenzhou so frequently that Luo Wenzhou had developed an impenetrable steel crust. He now darted into Director Zeng's office with a grin, completely unembarrassed. "Don't I know it. But I was born with a deeply admirable heart bent on public service, so I gave up twenty million USD a year. Shouldn't people sing my praises…? Anyway, I hear that we've got someone we kn—"

Luo Wenzhou froze, the word "know" dying on his tongue.

There were two other men in Zeng Guangling's office. One was Xiao Haiyang, the new colleague Luo Wenzhou was expecting. At the sight of Luo Wenzhou, Xiao Haiyang stood, greeting him formally with a "Sergeant Luo."

The man next to him was not so formal.

"It's true—we do know each other." Fei Du swept his delighted gaze from Luo Wenzhou's chest down to his knees, then concluded the free viewing with a smile. "Sergeant Luo had me over for a meal just last month. Thank you for your hospitality."

"Since you're all acquainted with each other, I'll skip the formalities," said Zeng Guangling. "Know how the bureau agreed to collaborate on a research project with Yancheng Public Security University's grad school? That was old Director General Zhang's idea: deriving theory from practice, then using the theory for practical applications. Like this twenty-year-old serial-killing case—it's worth researching. The university's set up a group specially for that purpose. Xiao-Fei is our contact person."

Luo Wenzhou was lost for words. What kind of dodgy research group would appoint *him* as a contact person? Had everyone else enrolled in the grad school at Luo Wenzhou's alma mater keeled over?

"Xiao-Xiao just arrived," Zeng Guangling continued. "Bring him over to the office to meet the rest of the team. Things are a little different from a few years ago—there are more young staff members on the criminal investigation team nowadays, so fitting in will be easier for you, Xiao-Xiao. Fei Du—"

Fei Du took his ankle off his knee. "Zeng-laoshi," he replied in a gentle, harmless way under Luo Wenzhou's pained gaze.

"Oh, no, please, no title," Zeng Guangling said, though he was obviously pleased by this term of address; a hint of a smile slipped inadvertently across his icy visage, and his tone softened slightly. "I only taught for two years. You can think of me as your dashixiong. Your teacher Dr. Pan spoke with me; if you need anything, just come by my office anytime and say the word. All right—go on and do what you have to, then… Not you, Luo Wenzhou."

Rubbing his nose, Luo Wenzhou stayed behind. Alone, he received a scolding from Director Zeng; then he was brought to Deputy Lu's office to attend some civic-awareness-enrichment meeting connected to that stupid research project. When at last he dragged his heavy feet back to the criminal investigation team, he was stunned to discover that his office was no longer the one he'd once known.

Luo Wenzhou stared at the extra desk in the space, one hand braced against the door as he silently awaited Tao Ran's explanation.

"We really couldn't fit two more desks outside," Tao Ran said cautiously from behind Luo Wenzhou. "But don't worry—I asked Fei Du, and he said he'll only be in once or twice a week, not every day. And he'll be gone as soon as the project concludes. You'll just have to put him up for a few days…"

Luo Wenzhou swept his gaze across the enormous air purifier in the corner. Then he turned to look at his old heap of odds and ends—but it had been cleared away and replaced with a multifunctional coffee machine and a mini-fridge about three feet tall. The fridge was full of cold drinks and

snacks labeled in various foreign languages. There was even a sign on the door that read PLEASE HELP YOURSELVES.

It certainly didn't look like Fei Du would just be here for "a few days."

Deputy Sergeant Tao didn't know what to say. He let out an awkward chuckle, then reached up to tousle his natural curls, turning his already messy hair into something fit for scouring pans. Watching Luo Wenzhou's face, he said guiltily, "Plus, I saw you in his car the other day, and I thought you guys were getting along pretty well…"

Luo Wenzhou turned and stared at him stonily.

"…now," Tao Ran finished quietly.

Luo Wenzhou snorted.

Tao Ran tried to hold himself back, but only managed it for a moment before breaking. "So…what's going on between you two?"

It was lunchtime, so Luo Wenzhou took advantage of the empty office to sigh aloud before complaining to Tao Ran. "I don't even know what's got him acting up. He's stopped picking fights with me lately, but now he's hitting on me at least every other day. That bastard—doesn't he know Daddy's about as straight as a corkscrew?"

Tao Ran was speechless.

"What?" Luo Wenzhou asked. "Go on. Spit it out."

"Well, the thing about Fei Du…" Tao Ran took a moment to find the right words. "I think children who grow up in complex environments like he did are bound to be unusually astute from an early age, with a strong understanding of social cues. You can sometimes tell that he's sweet-talking someone—especially a girl—just to make them happy without having any actual intentions toward them. And he's very sensitive to hints and implications. If he doesn't want to cross a line, he carefully avoids it… If he wants to avoid having anything to do with you, his sweet-talking stays superficial. Unless…"

Luo Wenzhou understood what Tao Ran was driving at. Either the narcissism Luo Wenzhou had been afflicted with since his teens was finally

metastasizing, or Fei Du was silently getting close to the sergeant because he *wanted* to cross that line.

When Luo Wenzhou didn't reply, Tao Ran sheepishly fell silent as well. They just looked at each other for a moment, Luo Wenzhou's expression unreadable and Tao Ran's complicated look screaming, *"Ignore me! Even I don't know what I'm talking about!"*

Luo Wenzhou's feelings when it came to Fei Du were extremely complicated. On the one hand, he'd genuinely spent a lot of time and energy worrying about Fei Du, unable to stop himself from going above and beyond to look out for the young man. On the other hand, Luo Wenzhou was also genuinely—and frequently—provoked to rage so often by Fei Du that he could almost feel the ulcers in the pit of his stomach. Over the seven-odd years they'd known each other, they'd been at each other's throats more often than not. Whatever Fei Du did, Luo Wenzhou's first reaction was always, "What trouble is he up to now?"

But Tao Ran's words had just opened a new door for him.

"Where is Fei Du?" Luo Wenzhou asked after a long moment.

"He took everyone out for lunch," said Tao Ran. "I was waiting here for you so that we could go together. We're eating at the hotel right outside."

Fei Du had played different roles in the two major cases the municipal bureau had handled over the past half year or so, and he'd become acquainted with the criminal investigation team at Yancheng's municipal bureau. But that was as far as most of the team's knowledge of him went. Only when he'd booked three private rooms at a high-end hotel had everyone realized: This flashy rich guy was here to make friends! When it dawned on them that Fei Du's presence going forward meant that anyone on duty could refuse such vices as instant noodles point blank, every one of Luo "Captain China" Wenzhou's men betrayed him—even Lang Qiao, who had borne witness to certain events.

Indeed, Luo Wenzhou could already hear Lang Qiao outside the office door selling him out. "You'll be leaving after the project's done? But will you be back? Hey, ever thought of coming to work for us after graduation? Look how often fate throws you and the bureau together! We'll keep the desk for you; I'm sure Sergeant Luo won't mind. He's got a sharp

tongue, but he’s a big softie—he brings us all breakfast every day. Sometimes he cooks something fancy and brings it to the office. That man’s kitchen skills, I swear—”

Someone prodded her shoulder.

Lang Qiao shrugged them off, snapping, “What?”

“What were you saying about the emperor’s kitchen skills?” Luo Wenzhou asked, leaning against the doorframe.

Lang Qiao’s spine stiffened, her neck cracking as she turned her head. She saw Luo Wenzhou positioned in the doorway, giving her a smile that didn’t reach his eyes.

“Go home and pack your bags, Princess Qiaoqiao,” he said warmly. “You’re being married off to North Korea.”

Lang Qiao paled. “Your Majesty, forgive your errant child!”

Luo Wenzhou looked up and met Fei Du’s eyes. Once again, Fei Du had styled himself in that arresting way—as the perfect picture of a penitent prodigal son. Luo Wenzhou felt fire flicker inside his chest. Inside his head, Tao Ran’s words replayed on repeat. The memory had gotten stuck like a bone in his throat, and the pressure on his pulse sent his bpm through the roof.

Strolling to the empty seat next to Fei Du, Luo Wenzhou rolled up his sleeves and began to speak with rare formality. “Firstly, I’d like to convey the essence of Deputy Lu’s meeting earlier. This collaborative research project with Yancheng PSU was attempted before, many years ago. Back then, it was called the Sketchpad Project. That iteration ended prematurely; however, last year, Director General Zhang broached the subject with the higher-ups a few times. Now it’s finally been approved. Should this reimplementation prove successful, the results will facilitate our work significantly, so I hope everyone will do their best to cooperate with the project.”

Luo Wenzhou was rarely so solemn in a private setting. Nobody dared to make a sound.

“Management of this project will be fairly strict. While the research group requests materials, all approval processes are to be filed in a manner

consistent with internal bureau procedure at every level of clearance. Case details that haven't been publicized are not to be photocopied, photographed, or removed from the bureau. Everyone in the research group must sign an NDA as a matter of course. Also"—Luo Wenzhou swept a quick look over Fei Du—"I hope our contact person will rein in his carefree, leisurely ways. The bureau is neither your school nor your family business; you can't simply come and go as you please. Director Zeng mentioned that you intend to come in every Tuesday and Friday. Is that right? In that case, I expect you to adhere to the standard office hours on those days. If you come in late or leave early, or if you want to switch your workdays or hours at the last minute, you need to provide an actual reason and request a leave of absence. Do you have any issue with that? If so, I suggest swapping someone else in as our point of contact."

At the start of Luo Wenzhou's speech, everyone had been listening seriously. Once they heard the second half, though, the whole criminal investigation team stared at him in silent disbelief as the king of carefree, leisurely behavior himself put on his act.

Their star actor—completely unaware of their incredulity—wasn't yet satisfied. "Moreover, as you've seen, our work isn't pretty," he added to Fei Du. "Normally, it's the major, important cases that get transferred to the municipal bureau. We encounter all kinds of crime scenes; blood and gore are the least of it. Sometimes we come across bloated corpses—"

Lang Qiao could take no more. "Your Majesty, are we eating or not?" she broke in.

"—and we have to suck it up and eat and drink normally anyway." Luo Wenzhou shot her a cold look. "Where was I…? We only have forensic pathologists on staff, not first responders. So a comrade prone to puking or passing out at the first sign of blood should reconsider whether they want to be here."

"Thank you for the reminder, Sergeant Luo," Fei Du responded, his expression unchanged.

Over the course of half a year, these two had evolved from being at loggerheads to communicating in code—they were a veritable headache. Tao Ran was forced to gracelessly interrupt Luo Wenzhou's pre-meal discipline. "How come I've never heard of the Sketchpad Project?"

Luo Wenzhou was kind enough to play along, letting Fei Du off. He took a wet towel and wiped his hands. “It was over a decade ago. You weren’t even in university yet. Back then, criminal profiling was all the rage overseas, and it was just being implemented in China. There were lots of unsuccessful trial attempts at profile ‘sketches.’”

Xiao Haiyang, who had been quiet this whole time, suddenly spoke up. “Why did it stop?”

Luo Wenzhou paused in the middle of wiping his hands, then resumed casually. “They didn’t have the resources, and a lot of the theories didn’t stand up to testing, so the project had no practical value. All right… Hurry up and eat. Don’t sit here having fun all day—we still have to work this afternoon.”

***

BUT THERE TURNED OUT not to be any meetings or important tasks to complete in the afternoon, so Luo Wenzhou absently reviewed the file on heightening Yancheng’s security during the National Day period. Having been forced to accept Fei Du’s occupation of his office, Luo Wenzhou was prepared to have his peace ruined for two days a week. To his surprise, though, Fei Du was extremely quiet. He neither misbehaved nor chatted idly; once he sat down, he simply flipped through his materials in silence, a living, breathing person quieter than the air purifier next to him. The biggest commotion he’d caused after moving in was the team’s tacit agreement to get rid of all the instant coffee and form a line, mugs in hand, for Fei Du’s all-in-one coffee machine.

The air purifier whirred. The only other sound in the room was the occasional soft rustle of fingers across pages. It was the season for drowsiness; curling up behind his desk, Luo Wenzhou felt himself nodding off, sinking into a doze in front of the dry document with its bright-red title. When he woke, Luo Wenzhou saw Fei Du in the same position as before. He himself was covered by a jacket, however, and the window behind him was now shut to keep out the cold breeze.

Luo Wenzhou removed the jacket, which was falling off him, and glanced surreptitiously at Fei Du from behind his computer screen. Anyone—male or female—with eyes would acknowledge that Fei Du was indeed a knockout. Luo Wenzhou couldn't help mulling over Tao Ran's words again. He had to admit that Tao Ran was right. After all, Fei Du wasn't a child who didn't know the weight of his actions, nor was he like Zhang Donglai, who would sleep with any living thing that stood still long enough. Fei Du was well-versed in the unspoken rules that governed social interaction. Other people might have only a hazy understanding of romantic and sexual tension, but Fei Du could analyze such tension, break it down to hundredths, and then create the precise amount he desired.

He knew Luo Wenzhou was gay. If he was kidding around, he wouldn't wield tension this intense.

But then…

Luo Wenzhou moved his cursor slightly, dismissing his lock screen. Despite all this, he wasn't *that* narcissistic. Why would Fei Du, newly enrolled, have been sent as this project's contact person? Had all the more senior students died? Somebody had to have pulled strings somewhere to make this happen. Fei Du had wanted to study at Yancheng PSU since last year. He'd received his acceptance letter in April, then immediately begun visiting the municipal bureau more often for all kinds of reasons, familiarizing himself with the criminal investigation team—and indeed, the whole bureau—in advance.

Now that Luo Wenzhou thought about it, had his grad school taken that into account? This obvious networking was so strategic that it smacked of active scheming.

Fei Du was like a seductively beautiful poison apple. Even when you knew a single bite could burn through your gut and rot your insides, a whiff of him made you salivate.

Luo Wenzhou stretched, loosening his stiff back, and tried hard to repress his lust before it spiraled out of control. He thought about something else Fei Du had mentioned in passing: the essay he'd written—which had supposedly been included in a psychology textbook—on the study of victims in criminal cases… Why, precisely, had he chosen that subject?

As Luo Wenzhou peered at Fei Du, thinking deeply, Fei Du rose and walked over. Alarmed, Luo Wenzhou flinched, but Fei Du didn't seem to have noticed his staring. He just walked to the water dispenser by the door, grabbing Luo Wenzhou's mug as he went past and filling it up for him as well.

Thanking him, Luo Wenzhou reached for the mug, but Fei Du didn't let go. Instead, he stretched his fingertips forward to touch Luo Wenzhou. Putting the mugs down, he braced a hand on the sergeant's desk and leaned in slightly, looking down at Luo Wenzhou. "You can come right out and feast your eyes, Sergeant Luo. I don't charge," he said huskily.

Luo Wenzhou didn't flinch. In a similarly breathy tone, he responded, "Is it a thing now for students at your university to sexually harass their superiors during a practical work experience?"

Fei Du met Luo Wenzhou's gaze with a carnivorous one of his own and held it for a long moment, then smiled and returned to his seat. "Maybe it's because you have sex on the mind that you've started seeing it everywhere. Do you think my presence itself is sexual harassment?"

Luo Wenzhou pulled out his cigarette pack, then glanced at the air purifier next to him, put the pack back in his pocket, and headed to the bathroom. He really had been celibate for too long.

With much effort, he survived until the end of the workday. Yet Fei Du didn't seem to be leaving. As Luo Wenzhou picked up his car keys, his gaze fell carelessly on the file Fei Du had out. He saw that Fei Du was rereading Xu Wenchao's confession; his eyes stayed fixed on one page in particular for a long time.

Fei Du seemed to have eyes in the back of his head. He even managed to hear the unspoken question in the pause of Luo Wenzhou's footsteps. "Xu Wenchao said that Guo Heng discovered him following Wu Guangchuan," he said. "After they talked, Guo Heng became suspicious of the relationship between Wu Guangchuan and Su Xiaolan, but he couldn't get the police to help. So Guo Heng began to investigate Wu Guangchuan himself and got Xu Wenchao to help keep an eye on him… Now, *this* sounds weird."

Pressing a hand to the back of Fei Du's chair, Luo Wenzhou looked over his shoulder at the section of the statement Fei Du's fingertip was

circling. “What’s weird about it?”

“At his wits’ end, Guo Heng was forced to ask Xu Wenchao for help. We just accepted that that was when Guo Heng told Xu Wenchao the details of Guo Fei’s case.”

Luo Wenzhou nodded. “That’s what Guo Heng himself said.”

“It’s been over twenty years. Guo Heng probably doesn’t remember exactly what he said. I don’t think he would’ve told Xu Wenchao about something as specific as hearing the bells in Guo Fei’s pencil case. That particular detail didn’t seem worth investigating further to either Guo Heng or the police at the time—it was just evidence that the phone call was linked to Guo Fei’s disappearance. And it was so emotionally damaging to him. Imagine his mental state then. Under what circumstances would he discuss that detail?”

“If Xu Wenchao asked, ‘How did you know it was your daughter on the phone?’” Luo Wenzhou hazarded.

“‘How did you know it was your daughter on the phone?’” Fei Du shook his head. “That would sound like Xu Wenchao was questioning the truth of what Guo Heng said.”

Suddenly, it hit Luo Wenzhou that only someone who knew absolutely nothing about the case would have instinctively questioned whether what Guo Heng said was true. But back then, Xu Wenchao had already known about the twisted relationship between Wu Guangchuan and Su Xiaolan, and that Su Xiaolan was the main perpetrator of serial kidnappings. With all that information, could he really have acted completely, convincingly ignorant? He’d only been thirteen at the time.

“If that was the case, Xu Wenchao is a truly terrifying person,” said Fei Du. “But if not, why did Guo Heng volunteer that detail himself? Was he just venting? If you were Guo Heng, a middle-aged man with a deep wound in your heart, would you vent to a boy around your daughter’s age?”

Luo Wenzhou frowned.

“Here’s another strange thing. Su Luozhan said that she got the idea of imitating Su Xiaolan after reading her diary. But I checked: Su Xiaolan only described how excited she was when she called the family. She never

mentioned the pencil case.” Fei Du rapped on the desk. “So the question is, how did Su Luozhan know?”

Luo Wenzhou froze, but before he could follow that hair-raising train of thought, the phone on the desk behind him rang. He picked up without looking.

“Still here? Excellent,” said Deputy Lu. “We’ve got a sticky situation on our hands, Wenzhou. See who’s on duty and bring them with you to the scene.”

Chapter 2

"A CAR ACCIDENT?" Luo Wenzhou repeated, bewildered. "What's that got to do with me? The traffic police team is right next door."

"Have you heard of Zhou Junmao?" asked Lu Youliang.

"Which Zhou Junmao?" A shiver went through Luo Wenzhou. The lovely evening sunlight seemed to blur around him. "Surely you don't mean *that* Zhou Junmao?"

Next to Luo Wenzhou, Fei Du silently lifted his head to look.

Zhou Junmao was a famous member of the Chinese diaspora. He'd been born seventy years ago in Dongdaogou, a prefecture just outside Yancheng, but he'd lived abroad from a young age. Starting in the construction-materials trade, he'd single-handedly built the enormous, multinational Zhou Group from scratch. In recent years, perhaps due to his old age, he seemingly wanted to return to his roots: The Zhou Group's investments had an increasingly local focus.

Zhou Junmao was unlike any other public figure. He was private and low-key, his lifestyle simple. He was also an avid philanthropist, especially when it came to basic infrastructure in his hometown—its present thriving status could be half credited to him. There was even a Junmao Road; it was the only road in all of Yancheng named after a living person.

Just half an hour earlier, Zhou Junmao had been heading from the airport back to his place in Yancheng when a large truck rear-ended his car. The rear of the vehicle was completely crushed, and old Zhou Junmao—who'd been in the back seat—had died at the scene of the collision. The driver and bodyguard sitting up front were severely injured; doctors were trying to save them in the hospital now.

The grisly tale of the car accident alone led one to imagine how wildly Zhou Group stocks would fluctuate once the news got out. But then the Zhous' younger son had run over to insist that his father had been murdered—that the police needed to investigate his death as a premeditated crime.

Ten minutes later, Luo Wenzhou was driving toward the airport highway alongside Lang Qiao, who was on night duty; Xiao Haiyang, who felt too shy to leave early on his first day; and Fei Du—just an extra warm body.

"Director Zeng brought his forensic pathologists over already," Luo Wenzhou told them. "We'll go to the scene first and take a look, say hi to the traffic team, then head to the Zhou estate. Don't worry, we won't be doing a month's worth of overtime again. We don't even know what's going on yet, but even if the crash *was* intentional, the financial crime department would lead the case—we'd only be helping out."

Lang Qiao popped her head out from the back seat. "Fei-zong," she said curiously, "you know a lot of rich people. Ever met Zhou Junmao?"

"Once, but we never really talked." Like an exemplary student, Fei Du held a textbook in his hand for the sake of appearances, even as he sat in the police car on the way to the crash site. "I know his younger son better—the one who insisted on making the report."

Lang Qiao looked up the Zhous on her phone. "Zhou Junmao has two sons. The older one is Zhou Huaijin. Wow—young, handsome, and capable. He went to top schools and started helping with the family business at a young age. Spends most of his time abroad. The other, Zhou Huaixin, is… an artist? Huh. That's the one you were talking about, Fei-zong? How do you two know each other? Through a love of the arts?"

"Oh, no," Fei Du replied. "Because we're both spendthrift heirs who neglect our duties."

There was nothing Lang Qiao could say to that.

Traffic was smooth on the airport highway that led out of the city. Before the sky had time to fully darken, they reached the scene of the collision.

As Fei Du was about to follow Luo Wenzhou out of the car, the sergeant pushed him back in through the door. Fei Du froze for a moment; then the corners of his lips twitched into a serene expression of cat-got-the-cream contentment. He glanced at Luo Wenzhou's back, not exactly revealing his glee but waiting calmly in the car.

Luo Wenzhou walked around the scene of the crash. All the casualties had been removed and the crash site itself more or less cleaned; there were no obvious signs of blood outside the yellow lines. Only after confirming this did he let the hematophobic man out of the car.

Fei Du walked up behind him. “That was surprising, Sergeant Luo. I’m touched,” he murmured.

“You’re that easily surprised?” Luo Wenzhou shot him a look, unmoved. “Your brain must operate in a state of constant turmoil, then… Lao-Qiu, where are you looking? I’m over here!”

The traffic cop supervising this scene was named Qiu, and he was a close acquaintance of Luo Wenzhou’s. The globe was chock-full of Sergeant Luo’s “close acquaintances,” from all types of professions. Fei Du looked on with cold indifference. He sensed that Luo Wenzhou had grown up in a free, broad-minded environment, enjoying unconditional care and affection as a child. Only such an upbringing would explain why—having been through so much, seeing humankind’s darkest and most disgusting sides, and even becoming sharp and sly through the demands of his work—he still opened his arms to the world, ready to embrace it, in his heart.

If you stood on the street watching everyone around you—male, female, young, old—it could sometimes start to feel as if everyone was the same. Everyone wore shirts and pants. The retiree strolling down the sidewalk could have on the same shoe brand as that blond-haired, blue-eyed foreigner. It created the illusion that the world was the same for everyone.

But people who lived under the light of the sun could probably never imagine the lives of those gritting their teeth against torture so inescapable it had become commonplace to them. People submerged in the depths of depression would likely never understand that the friends guffawing as they passed weren't forcing their laughter at all.

Thus, when they stood together, he and Luo Wenzhou really looked as though they came from the same country.

The human form can be such a perfect mask for the truth, Fei Du mused.

"If your question is whether there was anything underhanded about this whole affair, you guys will have to investigate that yourselves," said Lao-Qiu, the traffic cop. "If you ask me, it's just an accident—entirely the fault of the car behind them." He beckoned them over to watch the security footage. "This Bentley here is Zhou Junmao's car. From the moment it left the airport, it drove normally—perfectly standard, no problem there. Then a truck came down from Beiyuan Bridge. The footage starts from the Beiyuan Bridge intersection camera: That's Camera One."

He'd numbered the tightly packed rows of highway cameras and sorted their footage chronologically, then played each one for them in succession. "Not many cars were coming this way on the airport highway at the time. Starting from Camera Four, the truck's in the same lane as the Bentley. There were cars between them, but after some overtaking—we can see that on Camera Sixteen—there were no cars between them anymore. At that point, they were still a safe distance apart. But then—watch this."

On Camera Eighteen, the truck suddenly got a lot closer to the car in front of it. Closer examination showed that it was accelerating very steadily, as though the driver had put his foot on the pedal and forgotten to lift it off.

On Camera Twenty, the speed camera showed the truck approaching the Bentley at eighty-seven miles per hour, clearly exceeding the speed

limit. Then, as if its driver had gone blind, the truck continued toward the Bentley at that speed. Camera Twenty-One showed the rear-end collision in its entirety. Even though the viewers knew what to expect, the horror of the impact made their hearts jump.

"Where's the driver now?" Luo Wenzhou asked.

"Dead. He didn't make it to the hospital," said Lao-Qiu. "The truck logs say he'd been driving for ten hours, so he was probably fatigued. If it weren't for the victim's family claiming this was murder…" He trailed off. "Personally, after I watched the footage, I figured the accident was simple enough. The driver was too tired, got distracted, and stepped on the gas without letting up. The truck kept speeding, and bang—it was all over."

"What kind of person was the driver?" Luo Wenzhou asked. "Any priors?"

"His name was Dong Qian. He was forty-nine years old, and he drove cargo trucks for a living. The guy who came to ID his body was a convoy colleague who said he was an honest man. He'd been driving this same road for nearly ten years and never had an accident, never gotten into any trouble. There aren't *that* many people with criminal records running around, Sergeant Luo. Look at this guy—he wasn't the type to get involved with a Bentley owner. More like a BMX bike owner." Lao-Qiu took the cigarette Luo Wenzhou offered. "The guy who reported this—can he be trusted? Or is he one of those rich guys who just wants to create a scandal for the attention?"

Luo Wenzhou was reluctant to jump to any harsh conclusions until he saw Zhou Huaixin himself.

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AFTER MEETING GUYS like Zhang Donglai and Zhou Huaixin, Luo Wenzhou had to admit to himself that Fei Du was relatively normal compared to other useless heirs Yancheng had produced.

For an average adult male, Zhou Huaixin was a bit too slender. In fact, he was basically a walking stick. He was so thin that his cheeks were sunken; the criminal investigators, oversensitive to such matters, almost suspected a drug addiction. He wore a graphic tee so abstract as to be incomprehensible, and over that, what looked like a suit vest—except that it was so long that it reached his knees, and the two side slits went up to his waist, making the garment resemble one of the tie-on bum covers rural parents made toddlers wear over open-crotch pants. Seven or eight metal rings pierced the outer rim of his right ear, forming an arc, and the heavy eyeliner on his lids had run from all his crying; the smudges gave him a scary pair of panda eyes.

On the wall of his home was a masterpiece by Lord Huaixin himself: an oil painting almost ten feet wide, rendered in the most depressing shades. Luo Wenzhou was an uncultured man with little understanding of art. His appreciation of it ended at applauding verisimilitude—in his view, the more realistic a piece was, the better. But when he saw this painting, a discomfiting sense of suffocation overcame him.

The colors were dark, the lines messy. At a glance, you'd think it depicted a tempest or storm—a common enough subject for a painting. On a second look, however, there was a sun at the top-left corner of the canvas; the rusty reddish-brown lines weren't wind and rain, but rays of light. Under the blood-colored rays was a large patch of reeds, all with their heads lowered, drooping left and right, heavy and lifeless. Amid the reeds, a viewer could just make out a few skeletal figures seemingly facing something beyond the canvas.

Looking at the painting for too long was apt to make one sick.

"I don't think I can keep up with you people and your modern trends," Luo Wenzhou told Fei Du in an undertone. "What is the younger Master Zhou trying to express through this magnum opus?"

Fei Du glanced at the painting, but quickly averted his gaze in discomfort. The color of the lines was probably too bloodlike for him. "If I remember correctly, he did this painting at a seaside villa with a few famous models lying in the sand, posing for him. They were probably the original inspiration for those skeletons."

Luo Wenzhou found himself lost for words.

For the record, the painting was entitled *Beauty Over Bones; Form is Emptiness*.

“His style really isn’t popular. I don’t know about anyone else, but it was only for his father’s sake that I spent money on his art,” Fei Du finished quietly just as the skinny frame of Zhou Huaixin himself came down the stairs; he wiped his tears as he descended.

Fei Du’s expression changed into a perfect illusion of concern as he walked over to Zhou Huaixin. “Zhou-xiong, are you all right?”

When Zhou Huaixin saw a familiar face, his misery almost exploded from his eye sockets. “Fei-ye,” he whined in a trembling voice, crashing into Fei Du’s breast like a giant baby bird. A perfume very much like baby powder struck Luo Wenzhou full in the face, so strong and heavy it invaded his nostrils entirely. He choked and turned to sneeze.

Fei Du stumbled back slightly under Zhou Huaixin’s weight, squaring his shoulders so the other man could lean on them but keeping his hands loose at his sides. His manner most gentlemanly, he made no move to initiate any further physical contact with Zhou Huaixin, simply consoling him in a low voice. After a while, he offered an arm for support so he could slowly lead the bereaved man aside to sit.

“What are you doing here?” Zhou Huaixin asked through choked sobs.

“I’m back in school, and my supervisor assigned me to the city bureau for practical work experience,” Fei Du replied simply.

Only then did Zhou Huaixin notice the strangers around him. He bent forward to grab a stack of tissues, hiccupping as he spoke. “Are you guys po—*hic*—police? Fei-ye, wh—*hic*—what are you studying? Your in—*hic*—interests are so niche… No, my heart hurts. Let me lean on you for a bit…”

Without further preamble, he flopped into Fei Du’s arms like a boneless invertebrate. Luo Wenzhou felt a sudden surge of dislike for the man. “We were informed that you refuse to believe Mr. Zhou’s car crash was an accident,” he said in his most formal tone. “May we know whether you have a reason for that?”

With effort, Zhou Huaixin lifted his heavy lids. “My father worked out every day. He even ran a marathon this spring. No way did he die just like that—someone must’ve killed him!”

Lang Qiao was sitting to one side, making notes, and at this point she couldn’t help putting down her notebook and speaking up. “Mr. Zhou, I understand that you need time to process and accept what happened, but your father died in a car accident. Forget a marathon—even doing the Ironman Triathlon wouldn’t have helped him stop the crash.”

Zhou Huaixin let out a choked sob like a death rattle. He looked at Lang Qiao as if she were an evil, bug-eyed witch cursing a precious little princess.

“Zhou-xiong,” Fei Du said softly, “that isn’t evidence.”

Zhou Huaixin began to wail. “You don’t believe me either? My intuition’s always right! Dad always goes out in the big bulletproof car, *except* today—and today was when it happened! What—was that *coincidence*? He just had his seventieth birthday last week and announced that he was ready to retire. He said that he’d put in the will that part of the stocks would go to me and my brother, and as soon as he got back this weekend—”

Then he snapped his mouth shut, as if realizing he’d misspoken, and buried his head weakly in Fei Du’s chest, one hand pressed to his own heart.

Luo Wenzhou speared Zhou Huaixin with a look. “Mr. Zhou Senior only had two sons. If he didn’t leave a will, his fortune would go to you two anyway. Why would that be a reason to kill him? I know you’re upset, Mr. Zhou, but since you made this report, please take this investigation seriously and sit up when you speak.”

“I don’t know why. I just do my art. I don’t know about all these things. Go talk to my brother. I called him; he’ll be here by tomorrow morning.” Zhou Huaixin covered his face, avoiding Luo Wenzhou’s gaze. “A vehicle’s such a big murder weapon; it’s more lethal than knives and guns combined. But the street’s full of people who legally possess one, and we’re supposed to just get over a death after a simple ‘it was an accident’? Can’t you do your jobs?”

Though Zhou Huaixin probably hadn't meant for it to come across that way, his audience couldn't help but think of another incident. Fei Du's expression cooled rapidly, perhaps at the thought of his own father's mishap.

Luo Wenzhou lifted Zhou Huaixin by the scruff of his neck, rough and simple, separating him from Fei Du. "The truck driver's dead, Mr. Zhou. Do you mean to tell us that someone valued his own life so little as to deliberately go down with your father?"

Through the heavy circles around his eyes, Zhou Huaixin gave him a dark look. "What, Officer? You don't believe that money can buy lives?"

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LUO WENZHOU WENT BACK and forth with Zhou Huaixin for almost an hour. He didn't know whether the man was genuinely brain-damaged or just being a pain. Sometimes it was clear that he was hesitating over his words, as if he knew more than he was letting on but was simply unwilling to discuss it with someone outside his family. After the fruitless questioning, they tried to leave, but Zhou Huaixin clung to Fei Du. "Did you hear the rumor?" he asked vaguely.

Fei Du gave Luo Wenzhou a look, then patted Zhou Huaixin's shoulder. "Don't think too much about it."

But Zhou Huaixin didn't let go. In a soft voice, he asked, "Will you wait with me until my brother gets back?"

Before Fei Du could reply, Luo Wenzhou answered for him. "Don't dawdle. You need to write a report tonight, *Intern*." Fei Du shrugged helplessly at Zhou Huaixin. Then Luo Wenzhou seized him by the shoulder. "Hurry up," he said, shoving Fei Du out the door.

Luo Wenzhou pushed and prodded him to the police car, but Fei Du didn't seem to mind, even as he stumbled; a smile lingered on his lips.

"Fei-zong, is he into you?" Lang Qiao asked in a small voice, her eyes bulging. "That little snake—Zhou-whatever?"

“No,” Fei Du replied in an equally small voice. “He’s just sad, cold, and lonely.”

Understanding dawned on Lang Qiao. “You useless rich people are so morally bankrupt!” she lamented.

Slamming the door shut, Luo Wenzhou reached over to separate the pair. He pointed at Lang Qiao. “If you had half as much estrogen as that guy, you wouldn’t be struggling to find a husband. Fei Du, what was Zhou Huaixin trying not to say?”

“The wild rumor…” Fei Du sat up straight, looking unruffled. “That the virtuous, reputable Mr. Zhou has an illegitimate son.”

“What makes it a ‘wild rumor’?” asked Luo Wenzhou.

“The fact that I don’t believe it.” Fei Du stretched his legs and leaned back in the spacious passenger seat, creating a small crack in his “valedictorian” disguise through which you could see the very Fei Du-ish insouciance beneath. “If he really did exist, the Zhou family would’ve taken him in ages ago, since—”

Luo Wenzhou’s instincts told him Fei Du was about to say something dodgy. He was ready to interrupt, but Fei Du cut himself off, apparently realizing something too.

“Since what?” Lang Qiao pressed, confused.

“Since…old Mr. Zhou was always an upright man, so even if he made a misstep when he was younger, it was probably just the once. After decades of charity work, he’d be considered reformed. And his wife’s been dead for years, so nobody would say anything. There’s no such thing as a perfect man. Isn’t it even more precious if someone finds the right path after a mistake?” Adopting his most realistic serious face, Fei Du told Lang Qiao, “I believe that a man with Zhou-lao’s character would have no need to hide his past.”

Lang Qiao nodded throughout this speech, which convinced her that Fei Du was extremely principled. In terms of cultured modern youth, he was the moral ideal—a far cry from those “domineering” CEOs in her raunchy romances, who had no respect for law or for heaven.

Luo Wenzhou shot Fei Du a slight warning look. He detected what Fei Du was implying underneath all that—that his clique didn't consider bastard children a threat at all, especially not when it came to people as highly regarded as Zhou Junmao. Even if Zhou Junmao's wife hadn't died years ago, she would've been completely dependent on him; she'd have had no say over how many children he spawned outside their marriage.

"Anyway, where there's smoke, there's fire," said Fei Du in a different tone. "What Zhou Huaixin said about cars being murder weapons hidden in plain sight made sense to me. Should we look into that truck driver?"

Just as he said this, Xiao Haiyang's call came in. Luo Wenzhou had tasked him with talking to Dong Qian's colleagues and learning more about the truck driver's circumstances.

Xiao Haiyang unleashed a barrage of syllables over the line, and Luo Wenzhou almost felt his phone signal waver. Little Four-Eyes didn't seem to understand what punctuation marks were. "Sergeant Luo," he began, "I've spoken to Dong Qian's colleagues and his circumstances really were as Lao-Qiu said—nothing of note—so I started looking into his accounts, assets, medical records, and family; should I report on those to you now?"

"Hey, Four-Eyes… The man's dead, so there's no rush," Luo Wenzhou responded. "Come on. Take a deep breath and talk *slowly*. You got all that information that quickly? Even records on his physicals?"

Xiao Haiyang launched into his long debrief. "Dong Qian lived in Yancheng. He was widowed, no elderly dependents. Raised a daughter on his own. Her name is Dong Xiaoqing. She's twenty-four, unmarried, a college graduate, and works as an accountant for a department store. There are no red flags in either her or her father's accounts or assets. All their expenditures match their income and standard of living. Dong Qian had no notable vices. Simple life, sufficient income. They have six figures in their savings and a home in their name. Dong Qian's most recent physical showed high blood pressure, high blood sugar, and high cholesterol, but it was normal across the board otherwise. Ah, right—Sergeant Luo, I spoke to his daughter's coworker too, and they said she's had no large expenditures lately, doesn't have a boyfriend, doesn't have any serious illnesses, and is generally emotionally stable."

Since Luo Wenzhou had put Xiao Haiyang on speakerphone, all three of the car's occupants were wowed by his flawless patter.

"Holy crap," Lang Qiao muttered. "All this is just too…" She trailed off.

"Uh—weren't we trying to eliminate the possibility that he was hired to kill the victim? Was I pursuing the wrong train of thought?" Xiao Haiyang asked, confused.

Luo Wenzhou pointed at Lang Qiao, cautioning her, then replied to Xiao Haiyang. "So you're saying that he had no dependents and no financial burdens at home, and that he had quite a bit of money to spare. But taking on an urgent, important delivery like this one—was that a frequent occurrence? Or was this a one-off?"

Xiao Haiyang paused. "Um…"

"Truckers often drive even while they're tired, Haiyang. And old hands like Dong Qian rest with their eyes open sometimes—but they never keep a foot on the accelerator," Luo Wenzhou patiently explained. "Dong Qian drove for so many years without incident. If he didn't have any physical or emotional issues, how come he suddenly got into a crash today? If we want to determine whether he was hired to kill someone, the method of exhaustion won't be rigorous enough to determine that—you can only eliminate situations you can imagine, and so many problems in the world are beyond your imagination. If you can, try to stick to causes that evidence can support."

"Yes, Sergeant Luo! I'll go look now!" Xiao Haiyang replied hastily.

"Wait! I just said that because I wanted you to know. This case hasn't even been classed as a murder. You should go back first and—"

But before Luo Wenzhou finished, Xiao Haiyang had already hung up.

Luo Wenzhou was stunned. He finally understood why Xiao Haiyang had been so unpopular at the Huashi bureau—on top of being a terrible conversationalist, he was so passionate about his work that he seemed primed to seize power at any moment, rendering him a major hazard to people like Wang Hongliang. No wonder they'd never considered including him in their number.

The person who'd reported this death as a murder was hedging, the other relevant party was still on the way to Yancheng, and Forensics had nothing for them yet. Apart from Comrade Xiao Haiyang—full of beans, and racing madly to find the truth—nobody had anything to do. Luo Wenzhou dismissed the makeshift investigation group and dropped Lang Qiao off at home rather than returning her to her post. Then he and Fei Du headed back to the bureau to get their own cars and go home themselves.

Checking his phone, Fei Du found that news stories about Zhou Junmao covered the entire screen. He opened two links at random. "The Zhous are really hard to handle…" he mused. "Would it be dishonest of me to call my people and short the Zhou Group while the American markets are still open?"

Stuck in a bit of traffic at a U-turn, Luo Wenzhou gave him a puzzled look. "You mean Zhou Huaixin?"

"Who else could've bought these headlines so quickly? Listen to this one: 'Zhou Group Chairman Zhou Junmao Dead in Car Crash; Suspicious Circumstances Lead Younger Son to File Report,'" Fei Du read in a mocking tone. "What, did he think there wouldn't be enough fuss? It's Zhou Junmao. Even if he died normally, everyone would imagine melodrama around it, to say nothing of an actual unnatural death. Zhou Huaixin is one of Zhou Junmao's heirs, and he's the only one in the country. If he hadn't demanded a thorough investigation as soon as he could, what would people have suspected *him* of doing? After all, everyone initially suspected Malcolm and Donalbain[2] of killing their dear father."

The taillights of the cars ahead of them formed an endless snake. Pretending not to have heard what Fei Du had implied about himself, Luo Wenzhou asked calmly, "What was their relationship like, Zhou Huaixin and his father?"

"He was the unfilial son, the black sheep of the family, with an older brother more capable than him in every way… What do you think?" Fei Du shrugged. "I assume it was pretty difficult."

"What about you?" Luo Wenzhou asked quietly. "As far as I know, you never did anything out of line in your younger years, and you're an only child. Why would you and your father have a difficult relationship?"

Fei Du stiffened. He glanced at Luo Wenzhou, then shrewdly digressed. “Oh–are you that interested in me, Sergeant Luo? People say that someone only digs into your relationships with family members if they’re considering you as a spouse.” As he spoke, he turned slightly toward Luo Wenzhou and leaned in. “Are you sure you want to know? If so, I’ll assume that that’s your intention.”

The car in front of them edged forward, and Luo Wenzhou pumped the accelerator in a quick burst before braking quickly, which threw Fei Du back in his seat. “If you don’t want to talk about it, then don’t,” Luo Wenzhou said evenly. “Don’t play games with me.”

Fei Du smiled and fell silent.

After a long moment, the lights at the intersection changed, then changed again, and the stream of cars in the U-turn lane came to another stop. Frustrated by the thought of having to wait one more round, impatient drivers blared their horns. Occasionally, someone rolled down their window to look around, which revealed varying musical tastes.

Fei Du’s smile slowly disappeared. Whether because of the heavy darkness of the night or the loneliness that often came from being caught in such a crowd, he blurted, “I notice sometimes that it’s hard to escape one’s genes and upbringing.”

Luo Wenzhou gave him a look.

“Your outlook, habits, personality, demeanor, moral standards, cultural refinement… You can change all those later on. It’s like the foliage of a plant: If you want it to look different, you can trim it accordingly.” Fei Du leaned back in his seat, gazing into Yancheng’s night sky with half-lidded eyes. “But on a deeper level, more fundamental things are very hard to change—things that came out of interactions in your earliest years, before you had a concept of the world. Those things settle at the bottom of your subconscious, and a trace of them lingers in every thought you have in your mother tongue, however abstract. You can’t perceive them, but they haunt you for your entire life.”

At that point, Fei Du seemed to have exhausted his efforts. The door to his heart weighed tons, and the hinges were rusty; even pushing with all his might, Fei Du could only open it a sliver. Luo Wenzhou waited patiently, but nothing else came out.

“Lend me your hand, Sergeant Luo?” was all the warning Luo Wenzhou received before every bit of his focus honed in on his right hand, which Fei Du had covered gently with his own. Fei Du’s long fingers were ice-cold, but his palm was hot. His loose grip allowed him the freedom to pull away at any moment. Luo Wenzhou found it hard to describe the sensation that wriggled up his right arm. The car’s temperature seemed to have risen two degrees, and his forearm seized up involuntarily. Still, he didn’t pull free. Fei Du’s bowed head and cautious hand-holding reminded Luo Wenzhou of a nightmare-stricken Luo Yiguo racing over to share his pillow in the middle of the night.

The cars behind them honked impatiently. Luo Wenzhou started: The lights had changed.

Fei Du’s moment of weakness vanished like a puff of smoke. The corners of his seductive eyes curved as he swiftly lifted Luo Wenzhou’s hand to his lips and kissed the back of it, his fingertips brushing almost imperceptibly against the most sensitive part of Luo Wenzhou’s palm.

When Luo Wenzhou yanked his hand free, Fei Du blinked innocently at him. “Oh dear, my apologies. Your charms are too bewitching, Sergeant Luo—I couldn’t help myself.”

Luo Wenzhou almost laughed in annoyance. Fei Du provided a master class in seduction; he had a hundred tricks up his sleeve. As he finally reached the intersection, he asked, “Fei Du, have I been spoiling you too much?”

From Luo Wenzhou’s reaction, Fei Du figured that he’d gone too far, so he sensibly shut his mouth rather than adding fuel to the fire. He held tight to the door handle as Luo Wenzhou weaved irascibly through traffic and they flew back to the city bureau.

“Regular folks like me don’t prey on people we know, even if we aren’t all upright and serious,” Luo Wenzhou declared, pulling over. His expression slightly dark, he gestured for Fei Du to get out. “If you need a quick fuck, go ask your skeleton-painting drinking buddy.”

Getting out, he slammed the door shut and walked off.

Fei Du sat alone in the police car, surrounded by the unpleasant scent of the car’s air freshener. He took a moment to savor Luo Wenzhou’s

flustered discomfort, and found its texture surprisingly invigorating—something he couldn't get enough of.

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RUSHING TO THE HOSPITAL, Xiao Haiyang spotted his target from afar. He pulled out his badge as he jogged toward the devastated young woman. "Dong Xiaoqing? Hi, I'm—"

Dong Xiaoqing cut him off with a cold look. "A police officer?" Her eyes were bloodshot, her voice heavily nasal. "I know. You went asking around at my workplace, right? And now, since you couldn't find anything, you're here to question me?"

Xiao Haiyang was an awkward person, and at first, he didn't know how to reply. He cleared his throat nervously, then began again in his off-putting way, "I just want to understand…"

Dong Xiaoqing glared mulishly at him.

Not knowing how to be roundabout, nor how to ease tension, Xiao Haiyang decided to be direct. "Did Dong Qian always take on such heavy work?" he asked stiffly. "From what I've learned, your family—"

"My family doesn't owe anything to loan sharks, nobody's terminally ill, and my father wasn't some horrible gambling addict who couldn't pay his debts. We were poor, yes, but we lived all right. We didn't need to kill anyone for dirty money!" Everyone online was talking about the incident; rumors were spiraling out of control and flying directly at the young woman who'd now been left on her own. She grabbed her phone and threw it at Xiao Haiyang. "My father's accident was his fault and his responsibility," she declared. "I'm willing to pay whatever we need to, and I'll borrow whatever I can't afford, even if it means working like a dog for the rest of my life. But you can't slander him! He's dead! He can't defend himself! What sick thrill do you get out of accusing him?"

Xiao Haiyang picked her phone up off the floor. "Uh—"

“My mother died in a car accident! He couldn’t drive for an entire year because of that! He’d finally managed to touch a steering wheel again!” Tears poured down Dong Xiaoqing’s face as she glared bitterly at him. “And now you’re saying he crashed into someone for money? How could you? How could you people be so awful?”

Chapter 3

"DONG XIAOQING SAID that Dong Qian always did long-distance work, so this wasn't unusual. He always felt guilty about his daughter—she grew up without a mother and he had to make enough money for both of them, so he was never home to look after her. He wanted to save up a bit more for her when she got married. Anyway, time was always tight on a high-paying gig; he even had to run for toilet breaks. And gas thieves siphon from tanks at service stations, so no one driving solo would dare take much of a break—staying on the road for a ten-hour stretch is common. As for why Dong Qian happened to get into an accident on this particular stretch of road, that was probably coincidence. It might have been linked to a health problem; he'd been hospitalized a while back for an allergic reaction and after he was discharged, he had insomnia. Sergeant Luo, Dong Qian's wife died in a car accident, so he couldn't drive for ages. Would someone like that crash into another car on purpose?"

Luo Wenzhou listened to Xiao Haiyang's entire report without interrupting. He was so afraid that he might accidentally trigger Xiao-Xiao's fervor for criminal investigation again that he managed to keep his mouth shut instead of dispensing his words of wisdom. He concluded the exchange by acknowledging Little Four-Eyes and reminding him to go home and rest.

It looked as though Mr. Zhou's accident really hadn't been the product of over-the-top drama within a wealthy family.

People like the Zhous, who were featured on the news at the drop of a hat, were like catnip to conspiracy theorists. Perhaps Zhou Huaixin had just been seizing the moment to fuss until the police came over, cooking up criminal news of questionable veracity and demanding an official statement from the authorities to clear himself of blame. Fei Du's suggestion made a lot of sense. Fei Du had also said…

That bastard. The thought of him made Luo Wenzhou's chest throb relentlessly.

Enduring that chest pain, Luo Wenzhou decided to heat up some leftovers. But just as he washed his hands, Luo Yiguo wandered over, wiggling his butt. Lord Kitty had probably just woken from a good nap; he arched his back, rolled his shoulders, and pushed his bum out in a cheerful stretch, meowing sweetly. Sniffing around Luo Wenzhou's feet, he lowered his eyelids and rubbed against Luo Wenzhou's pant leg.

Except when begging for food, Luo Yiguo seldom acted cute the way cats usually did. Graced by that unexpected honor, Luo Wenzhou bent down to stroke the kitty and scratch his chin; he didn't even mind that he'd just washed his hands. Luo Yiguo's huge, round eyes flashed coldly, fixing upon the exposed hand. Seeing that he'd successfully baited his target, he shrank back—first with his hind foot, then his whole body—and leaped, his teeth bared.

When the cat started acting cute, it *was* usually for the sake of a cattack. Luo Wenzhou drew his hand back immediately, too seasoned a litter-shoveler not to recognize the prelude to a pounce. Thanks to his height, the damned cat missed him. Luo Wenzhou lowered his palm to smack Luo Yiguo's forehead, pressing him into the floorboards. "I knew you had something up your sleeve!"

Ever since Luo Yiguo realized that his litter-shoveler was wearing thicker and thicker clothes, and that he couldn't bite through his pant leg anymore, the cat had been inventing new ways to catch his prey. But now his enemy was even more cunning. Not only did he come home late, he also refused to lie down and take a biting. Luo Yiguo, highly displeased, slapped Luo Wenzhou with his tail. Luo Wenzhou reached down to pick him up by his soft belly.

"Honestly, what are you boys thinking?" Luo Wenzhou grumbled, pinching the cat's face. "I feed and water you, I spend a lifetime's allowance of patience and more on you, and all you do in return is create designs on me. Where's your conscience, huh? Heartless things!"

Luo Yiguo yowled in protest.

"Shut up!" snapped Luo Wenzhou. "What are you calling out for?"

The ball-shaped Luo Yiguo was easily subdued. His tail drooped weakly as he hugged Luo Wenzhou's arm with all four legs.

Luo Wenzhou exchanged glares with him before filling his food bowl in a huff. The cat had a better memory for food than pain, so as soon as he was fed, he forgot his grudges. He jumped off Luo Wenzhou and did a roll, then rubbed happily against Luo Wenzhou's hand, calling a one-sided truce.

Luo Wenzhou sighed, tired of being incessantly played by these flighty creatures.

He sat on the floor for a while, his right hand somehow still burning from Fei Du's harassment. When he shut his eyes, that half-smiling visage floated to the fore of his mind, making him restless and agitated. That agitation reached its peak in the wee hours of the morning, when Luo Wenzhou woke from a messy tangle of dreams to find part of his anatomy unharmoniously alert. It wasn't even five o'clock when he sat up in bed, threw aside the covers, and went to the bathroom to deal with his body's needs. After that, he splashed cold water on his face and then braced himself against the sink, panting heavily with a complicated look on his face. *If that bastard Fei Du flirts so brazenly with me again*, he thought in a state of wakefulness particularly vulnerable to rash behavior, *I'm not going to hold myself back.* He just wanted to be a gentleman—why did he have to deal with such torture in this day and age?

Suddenly, Luo Yiguo tumbled down from his position at the head of the bed, landing on his feet and darting to the bathroom door.

"What?" Luo Wenzhou growled.

Luo Yiguo looked back at him, swishing his tail. The vague tune of "Song of the Fifth Ring" followed him. Luo Wenzhou froze and sobered completely. That was the sound of his phone, buried in the sheets.

A criminal investigator's phone ringing in the dead of night seldom meant anything good.

***

"ZHOU HUAIJIN'S PLANE landed on time, just after two a.m. He texted his brother to say that he'd hailed a taxi, so no one had to pick him

up. Traffic would have been clear at that time of morning, so he should've reached home in half an hour—forty minutes at most. But they waited for two whole hours without a word from him. And when they called him, his phone was switched off!"

Luo Wenzhou marched past the sea of police cars toward the Zhou house—his second time there in twenty-four hours. "Isn't Zhou Huaijin the kind of wealthy heir who'd have a driver and bodyguard with him at all times? Why would he land in the middle of the night and hail a taxi?"

As soon as he spoke, someone replied in an annoying drawl. "That's just the kind of person Zhou Huaijin is. Low-key, humble, polite, very considerate. People always say that he's too nice, that he lacks drive, but he also has a reputation for integrity. Coming back in the middle of the night and refusing to trouble his staff and bodyguards is his style."

Luo Wenzhou looked up and saw Fei Du, smartly dressed and waiting at the entrance of the Zhou family home. He gave Luo Wenzhou a little nod. "Sergeant Luo." He'd uttered both his earlier statement and his greeting calmly, as if the man who'd parted disagreeably from Luo Wenzhou the evening prior had been someone else entirely.

Zhou Huaixin had cried himself into an unidentifiable lump on the sofa, rolling around and refusing to rise. Before Luo Wenzhou even approached, he could hear the lump wailing, "I *said* my dad was murdered! I *told* you, but you didn't believe me, and now my brother's gone missing! I bet someone will be happy once we're all dead! Where are the police? The police are useless!"

Luo Wenzhou frowned.

Spotting Fei Du, Zhou Huaixin immediately howled, "I don't mean you, Fei-ye. If my brother…if my brother's gone, what'll become of me? Won't they eat me alive? Oh…no, I can't… My…my heart…my heart hurts… My medicine…"

A housekeeper inched forward quickly to hold out a bottle of imported vitamins. Fei Du took it and helped the younger Mr. Zhou swallow a dose, calming his fragile little heart.

Luo Wenzhou's eye twitched. The sergeant noticed that Fei Du's student-like garments had been swapped out—he now wore a more formal

shirt—and that he was back in glasses. The shirt was slightly wrinkled too, which clearly suggested that he hadn't put it on in the early hours just now after being roused from bed. Meanwhile, Luo Wenzhou's phone exploded with push notifications about the dropping share prices for anything linked to the Zhous—over the past twenty-four hours, they had become the favorite of short-sellers in foreign markets. It only took one look at Fei Du to see what he'd done after leaving the municipal bureau. Yet while his cologne all but screamed "vested interest," he was playing the part of the good friend, sitting next to an inconsolable Zhou Huaixin and wholeheartedly comforting him.

Shameless capitalist.

"Have we traced his phone's location? Quick—secure the site, and make sure nobody enters the Zhou house who doesn't need to be here. We can't afford a leak. Has Tao Ran reached the airport yet? Tell him to get security footage for the taxi stand." Luo Wenzhou walked over to the vitamin-devouring Zhou Huaixin. "When did your brother decide his itinerary, Mr. Zhou? And who knew his flight details?"

Zhou Huaixin threw his hands onto his chest girlishly. "I called him after Dad's accident yesterday. Who knew? Everyone could've, I guess. I don't know. But it's normally the company secretary who books his flights."

As soon as he'd spoken, a well-groomed middle-aged man rushed in. "Huaixin! Huaixin! I came back to Yancheng as soon as I heard. What happened? How come there are there so many police?"

Hearing the voice, Zhou Huaixin abandoned his vitamins and struggled to rise from Fei Du's embrace. "Hu-dage! My brother's missing!"

Fei Du straightened his collar, unbothered. He nodded at the harried man from a distance and murmured to Luo Wenzhou, "This is Hu Zhenyu, one of the executives who holds actual power in the Zhou Group's local office. He went to college with Zhou Huaijin; he's clearly on *his* side."

Luo Wenzhou's eyes drifted involuntarily to Fei Du's hand where it rested on his collar, and to the neck and barely visible clavicle beneath. He reached out to gesture mildly for Fei Du to button up, then turned to Xiao Haiyang, who stood next to him. "Something has happened to two generations of Zhous, one after the other. It can't be a coincidence. Dig

deeper into Zhou Junmao's accident—don't just take that girl's word about it."

Xiao Haiyang made a noise of acknowledgment and dashed off.

The morning sun, unwilling to be alone, had begun to rise over the horizon, and quiet Yancheng slowly awakened to descend into a chaotic day.

Tao Ran called. "We found Zhou Huaijin's taxi. The plate was from Yancheng: BXXXXX. The driver had been beaten unconscious and dumped by the road. He came to and went to the hospital, where they helped him make a report to the local police. He did that five minutes ago. Now the car's at—"

A technician looked up. "Sergeant Luo! We located Zhou Huaijin's phone!"

As Luo Wenzhou raised his head, the two voices overlapped.

"—the Baisha riverside…"

"It's near Baisha!"

With a dramatic roll of his eyes, Zhou Huaixin fainted onto Hu Zhenyu. A cluster of people helped him onto the sofa, where he slowly regained consciousness. Then, crying, he howled, "Did they drown my brother in the river, Hu-dage? I'm going to kill that bastard Yang Bo! And where did Zheng Kaifeng run off to? Why hasn't he come back, after what happened to my dad…?"

Hu Zhenyu's expression changed. He hurriedly signaled Zhou Huaixin to shut his mouth. But there was no way to stop this stupid hipster's burst of madness. As Hu Zhenyu broke into a cold sweat on top of the hot sweat his running had produced, all he could do was force a polite smile for the audience of new faces. "Huaixin's just a child, and all this is too much. He's in shock; he's not in control of himself. Don't listen to his nonsense."

At that, Zhou Huaixin sprang up like a reanimated corpse, his eyes red. "It's *not* nonsense! It has to be that son of a bitch! Don't think you can keep me in the dark! That fucking mutt's been plotting all this time. He

killed my dad and brother so that he could bully me, since I don't know anything about the business, right? Even Uncle Zheng is on his side!"

"Huaixin!" Hu Zhenyu suddenly raised his voice.

"Send a team to Baisha River and start looking," Luo Wenzhou ordered in a low tone, then turned to Hu Zhenyu. "Hu-zong, there's been a kidnapping and a suspected murder, so this is now a criminal investigation. Whether it's a family matter or not, these are all important pieces of information, and if you hide anything important from us, you'll be held responsible. I hope you understand how critical this is."

Hu Zhenyu was a smooth operator. No sign of offense crossed his face, even over Luo Wenzhou's severe words. He reached up to wipe away his sweat. "Of course. I understand. Zheng Kaifeng—Zheng-lao… Well, I'm sure all you officers have heard of him. He was Zhou-lao's right-hand man when they were young. He's not young anymore, but he's still the pillar of the whole group. As for Yang-zong—Mr. Yang Bo—that's Zhou-lao's board secretary. He's young and capable, but since he's such an exceptional talent, he's an easy target for unsavory rumors, which happened to make their way to Huaixin. And Yang-zong is one of those… What do the people call them…'overachievers'? When Zhou-lao was alive, he used to compare Huaixin to him a lot, so of course they don't have the best relationship. But him hurting Zhou-lao and Zhou-zong? I would never believe it." As he spoke, Hu Zhenyu kept his gaze half on Zhou Huaixin, watching for signs of further agitation. "Those two weren't even in the country when it happened; they got word immediately after the crash, so they're both rushing back by plane now. I'll send you their flight numbers so the police at the airport can keep an eye on them. We can't have a third incident on our hands!"

Yang Bo was only a few years older than Zhou Huaixin, but he'd already climbed to the top echelon of the Zhou organization. He sounded like a likely candidate for the rumored lovechild. Luo Wenzhou looked up at Fei Du, who confirmed that with a silent nod.

Just then, Lang Qiao burst in at top speed. "Boss! Bad news!"

Luo Wenzhou shot a glance at their audience, who'd all pricked their ears, then gestured to Lang Qiao before leading her out the door. "What's up?" he asked.

“Look.” Lang Qiao took out her phone. The news had made several headlines—*Zhou Group Heir Zhou Huaijin Kidnapped*—but the links that should have accompanied the headlines below had been deleted.

“I was the one who asked the internet police[3] to take them down,” said Lang Qiao. “Here’s the video they linked to.”

With a tap of her finger, a clip appeared on-screen. The shaky camera focused on an unconscious man in a chair, moving across his face to capture various angles. The man was good-looking for his age, although soberly dressed. He looked to be thirty or forty; it was hard to tell exactly how old he was. Despite his pitiful situation, he came across as stately and poised.

Fei Du only needed one look to recognize him. “Zhou Huaijin.”

Luo Wenzhou’s scalp went numb. The kidnappers hadn’t asked for money, nor taken their captive’s life. Rather than contacting his family, the first thing they’d done was upload this video online. What were they up to? Had they watched too many British TV shows?![4]

Chapter 4

THE VIDEOGRAPHER WAS CAREFUL. Apart from Zhou Huaijin himself, the only things that were visible on camera were the crappy wooden chair the man sat on and a bit of the rope he'd been tied with. The background was pure black and gave no clue as to where he was. It was a short clip, less than a minute long, that just showed Zhou Huaijin unconscious.

Beyond that, there hadn't been a peep from the kidnappers.

"It was posted by someone behind a number of proxies," said Lang Qiao. "We'll need time to find the original poster's IP. I've never encountered such a bizarre kidnapper before, Boss. What are they planning? What do we do?"

Luo Wenzhou didn't respond. He swiped through his phone. Lang Qiao had reacted quickly, dealing with the video the moment she became aware of it, but the news of Zhou Huaijin's kidnapping by an as-yet-unknown perpetrator seemed to have grown wings. It was flying all over the internet, even with several keywords now blocked.

"When was this uploaded?" Luo Wenzhou asked.

"Six in the morning."

Six sharp. That was when the city began to wake. Short of an alarm clock, what better way was there to wake everyone up than a piece of well-founded, well-devised gossip about a household name?

Next to Luo Wenzhou, Fei Du sighed and took a step back. "Sergeant Luo, should I distance myself from law enforcement and start cooperating with the investigation as a person of interest?"

Lang Qiao was nonplussed. "Huh?"

"What are you 'huh'-ing about? He's a suspect now too." Luo Wenzhou tossed the phone at Lang Qiao, then turned to Fei Du, unfazed. "What I need to know now is who could've been involved in this—and who's blowing it up behind the scenes. Give me a list of names."

Zhou Huaijin kept a low profile. He rarely appeared on film or in photos, and very few clear images of him existed. Anyone could recognize a celebrity or an actor, but who would know this heir who usually lived abroad? How had that clip of less than a minute grabbed so much attention? Who was spreading it?

Zhou Junmao's fatal car crash and Zhou Huaijin's kidnapping appeared linked—as if someone had plotted to kill the elder man, then target the younger in an intricate plot straight out of a drama about a rich family. But when you paused to think about this, it was strange. If the car crash had in fact been planned, then the next incident should likewise have targeted Zhou Huaijin's life, but in a surreptitious way. After all, the driver who'd caused the crash died; if the police didn't find any evidence of murder, they could easily have classed it as a regular car accident.

But Zhou Huaijin's kidnapping was ostentatious, as though whoever was behind it wanted to make a scene and show off. The two incidents were at cross-purposes. It didn't make sense.

What was the point of publicizing the kidnapping, essentially shouting it from the rooftops, except to make the police and public suspicious? Such a sensitive incident at such a sensitive time would doubtless only yield benefits that could be reaped by the salivating, bloodsucking capitalists who stood to profit from the Zhou Group itself—people like Fei Du. And a certain someone had probably made enough money over the past night to buy two municipal bureaus, if municipal bureaus *could* be bought.

"I can give you a list of the ones I know," said Fei Du. "But you need to understand that everyone in the world is looking for a chance to profit. Forget retail investors—who knows how many companies and organizations are involved? I'm no god—I don't know everyone."

"The culprit took someone from Yancheng Airport without anyone noticing. That looks like the work of someone with a lot of power here." Luo Wenzhou's gaze pierced Fei Du. "You wouldn't claim to be unfamiliar with anyone in this area, would you, Fei-zong?"

"As a suspect, let me give you a tip. You don't have to consider it—I may not be right," said Fei Du. "But I suspect that while the kidnapper is linked to the person publicizing the kidnapping, they might not be the same

person, and they might not have planned in advance to collaborate. *Das Kapital* says that people would stomp over any law for a one hundred percent profit, but personally, I think that statement is a bit unfriendly. Really, everyone knows that even with a profit rate of a thousand percent, you need to be alive to cash in. We may squeeze money out of people, Sergeant Luo, but we don't crush them to death."

His words were as cold-blooded and offensive as one could want. Luo Wenzhou eyed him icily. In an instant, they seemed to return to the moment during the He Zhongyi case when Fei Du had spoken in the most self-aggrandizing way about finding Zhang Donglai an alibi.

"Fine. Let me be more precise." Fei Du spread his hands, smiled, and poured fuel on the flame. "We don't do it in the light of day."

The heavy, stifling atmosphere alarmed Lang Qiao, who was certain that in the next second the men would leap at each other's throats. Neither let up: Their gazes were like lightsabers about to bash into each other and send sparks flying. She stood nervously aside, struggling to think of a way to relieve the tension. Unfortunately, she had no clue how this fight had started in the first place.

Luo Wenzhou finally looked away, taking the first step back from the silent standoff. "The clip took less than half an hour to go viral. It seems like that was done by someone experienced, maybe an archrival of the Zhou Group. With that to go on, how much time will you need to get me that name list?"

Just as Luo Wenzhou spoke, Fei Du's phone pinged—the pleasant sound of an email notification. Fei Du had seemingly expected this request well in advance; he tossed the phone to Luo Wenzhou without so much as a glance at it. "It could probably only be two or three companies, then. Here's the name list my assistant sent over. You can call in their higher-ups."

Then he looked away from Luo Wenzhou and, stuffing his hands in his pockets, headed back inside the Zhous' mansion. He accepted a cup of black tea from the housekeeper in a most familiar way, then went to speak with the sobbing Zhou Huaixin.

Luo Wenzhou glanced down at the email on the phone. It was clear that Fei Du's employee was extremely reliable. In almost no time, they'd provided the names of the groups under suspicion, the names of contacts at

each group, those contacts' phone numbers, and the relevant experience each contact had in such endeavors. It was a detailed little report.

Luo Wenzhou forwarded the email to Lang Qiao. "Go do the legwork for this," he told her. "We don't just need to talk to these people—we need to look at their work emails, call logs, and financial situations. It'll require approval, and we'll need to get some of the financial-crimes guys to help."

His orders were brief, but they meant a load of menial work for Lang Qiao. Just hearing that made her hair stand on end.

Then Luo Wenzhou added, "If Fei Du's right about the person publicizing the video clip not knowing the kidnapper, then something might happen very soon. This whack job could do anything for views—including put the victim in more danger. So step to it!"

Lang Qiao inhaled sharply, feeling Luo Wenzhou's words weigh her down with an extra two and a half tons of pressure. She turned and ran off, forgetting all about the unspoken drama between her boss and his pretty boy.

After a long period of inactivity, Fei Du's phone locked. The lock screen background was a default image that had come with the phone, and the metal phone case was warm from Luo Wenzhou's hand. Luo Wenzhou looked up and watched from afar as Fei Du conversed easily with Hu Zhenyu and Zhou Huaixin, his body language extremely relaxed. Luo Wenzhou guessed that he was telling them about how the investigation was developing. He didn't go over to put a stop to it; Fei Du was sharp as a tack, and he wouldn't say the wrong thing.

But ages ago, Luo Wenzhou had thought Fei Du was dangerous.

There was no limit to mankind's greatness, nor its depravity, but barring extreme circumstances, the thoughts of a normal person reared in a lawful society were confined within certain parameters. For instance, an average person, upon learning that someone out there was committing crimes, might be curious enough to brave an investigation, or report it reasonably to the relevant authorities—or they'd quietly leave, unwilling to get involved. More immoral parties might even be tempted to join in. Such reactions all fell within the realm of normalcy.

But dumping someone you'd killed in a criminal's usual haunt to attract police attention? That did not.

In peacetime, even the most terrible murderer knew in his bones that backing someone into a corner wasn't a casual thing. The law's red lines were drawn clearly across society, and after generations of emphasis and repetition, those lines became a border of acceptability within the citizens' subconscious minds. But Luo Wenzhou knew that Fei Du was different. In Fei Du's mind, those borders were like the rules of a game, to be maneuvered the way one might exploit a loophole to avoid taxes or circumvent regulators to access foreign capital. When it was too much hassle, he couldn't be bothered to do it—but if he had to do it, he felt no compunctions over it. In fact, he enjoyed exploring "game strategies" in case he needed to use them one day.

Yet Luo Wenzhou's opinion of him had gradually changed over the course of the He Zhongyi case. He'd witnessed Fei Du sitting with He Zhongyi's mother, Wang Xiujuan, on ice-cold chairs, then spending a tidy sum to put his face on the Sky Screen. Later, he saw Fei Du drag himself out in the middle of the night—despite his broken arm—to save Chenchen from Su Luozhan's knife. All that made Luo Wenzhou think that Fei Du just had a sharp tongue after all…

Until just now when—for a single moment—he suddenly saw something else in Fei Du's perfect smile and acute punchability. Something unusual.

Luo Wenzhou thought of the cryptic monologue Fei Du had delivered in his car the previous evening. It had, he realized now, been more than an idle change of topic. Fei Du seemed to have grown up in a unique space. When he was good, it was true good, and when he was evil, it was true evil. That space had rules that were different from those in the real world. But Fei Du was clever; he knew he was different from everyone else. Thus, he was careful to imitate Tao Ran, or Zhang Donglai, and every other person he came in contact with, adopting a disguise of human skin and limiting himself within its bounds. Only when he was around Luo Wenzhou—so cocky in his youth, and so eager to tear down other people's facades—did Fei Du give up and allow his skin disguise to sit rumpled and unkempt, exposing his venomous fangs.

He didn’t know why, but as soon as that thought came to him, Luo Wenzhou no longer felt like holding anything against Fei Du. Everything about Fei Du’s behavior from yesterday evening up till now seemed to become perfectly reasonable. When Luo Wenzhou vaguely detected Fei Du’s sly, anxious, silent form of self-defense, the myriad emotions that ensued in his heart bloomed into gentleness.

Just then, the sudden ring of a phone call from Tao Ran interrupted Luo Wenzhou’s gaze and thoughts.

“We found the taxi,” said Tao Ran. “It had been dumped by the reservoir. The interior smells like ether, and there’s a shoeprint on the back of the driver’s seat, but no other signs of a struggle. I suspect there was more than one kidnapper—no way could one person drive and keep a grown man subdued at the same time. Oh—and we found Zhou Huaijin’s bag in his car. His ID, phone, and wallet are all untouched—” Tao Run broke off with a sudden angry hiss.

Luo Wenzhou detected the bitten-off oath in his tone. “What’s wrong?” he asked quickly.

“Someone’s taking photos,” Tao Ran replied. “They might’ve followed us from the airport. I’ll go take care of it.”

Luo Wenzhou hung up and massaged the spot between his brows. He really didn’t want this to get online again; he didn’t even need to see the process to know how it would explode.

“They found the vehicle the victim was taken in,” he told his team. “Zhou Huaijin is at least six feet tall—he’s not some child they could just lead away. They must’ve transferred him to another vehicle of some kind.” He began issuing instructions. “Check the cameras within a mile and a half of where the taxi was abandoned for a suspicious car. Talk to the media—tell them that if they start blowing this story up, they’ll have us to deal with. And call the internet police for extra hands—”

Before Luo Wenzhou finished his sentence, a technician suddenly looked up. “Sergeant Luo! The same person who posted that first video just uploaded a new one!”

Luo Wenzhou’s heart sank.

This video showed the same black background and unconscious Zhou Huaijin. What was new was the black-gloved hand brandishing a knife, holding its sharp, shining blade against Zhou Huaijin's neck. Suddenly, it pressed down. With involuntary gasps and cries, they watched a cut form in a highly dangerous spot on Zhou Huaijin's neck. The unconscious man twitched, and his blood began to flow.

Then the angle shifted. Two hands in black gloves tore Zhou Huaijin's shirt open and dipped a little brush in his blood to write on his chest: *1 delete = 1 cut.*

The internet police officers standing ready to delete the video broke into cold sweat and immediately called Luo Wenzhou. "Sergeant Luo, do we delete it or not?"

The sun's rays blanketed Yancheng as the morning rush hour began. In that instant of hesitation from the police, the video was already being forwarded at an uncontrollable speed, bursting out and spreading like a bomb.

Zhou Huaixin screamed so loudly that the roof almost shattered. Fei Du grabbed him by the waist, picking him up, then wrested his phone from him and stuffed it in the hands of the hapless housekeeper next to them. "Please take him upstairs to rest."

It was then that a car arrived at the gates of the Zhou family home. A man of about twenty-eight or twenty-nine emerged from it, apparently in a rush. He tried to enter the house, but the police at the front door stopped him, so he hastily fished out his ID. "Excuse me. Here's my ID and business card. I was Zhou-lao's—"

Zhou Huaixin turned to look at the newcomer, then began to struggle violently. "No! Arrest that bastard! That's the murderer! You shameless fucker, coming to our house! How dare you come here, Yang Bo?!"

Even though Zhou Huaixin was a walking skeleton, his frenzy still caused quite a commotion. Not even the ample combined strength of Fei Du and Hu Zhenyu could hold him. He swung his arms like weapons, and one smashed into Fei Du's glasses.

A hand reached out of nowhere to grasp Zhou Huaixin's flailing, sticklike arms in a vise grip. Luo Wenzhou pushed the precious little Master

Zhou’s head down with his other hand as if he were handling a mere chick, pressing him into a little ball on the soft, genuine-leather couch. “Do you want a sedative or a rabies vaccine?” he growled from above.

Cruelly suppressed, Zhou Huaixin was forced into silence. The young man at the door laughed bitterly, then finished introducing himself. “I was Zhou-lao’s assistant, as well as the board secretary. My name is Yang Bo.”

At that point, everyone’s eyes focused on him: Yang Bo, the alleged lovechild, the potential suspect, the one who stood to gain from the deaths of Zhou Junmao and Zhou Huaijin…

He’d certainly made his entrance early.

Chapter 5

"I WAS IN CANADA on a business trip yesterday. I rushed back as soon as I got the news. But on the way back, I heard about Huaijin-dage…" Yang Bo braced both elbows on his knees and wiped his face hard, then took several deep breaths. "I'm sorry. It's all so sudden. I'm a little… I really don't know what to do…"

The criminal investigation officer sitting opposite Yang Bo raked his eyes over the man, studying him closely. Then he took out his notebook and said without preamble, "Mr. Yang, we're trying to get a full picture of this case, so I'll be direct. There are rumors that you're Zhou-lao's son. Is that true?"

Yang Bo, accustomed to civility and insincerity, couldn't handle such sudden, impertinent honesty. His face stiffened. "What are you saying?!" He sat up straight almost unconsciously, his expression stormy. "That's nonsense. And it's an insult to my competence at work, as well as to my mother and Zhou-lao. I don't know where you heard that baseless rumor. Do you always—"

He glared daggers at the officer in front of him, but bit his tongue as he strained to hold back the words *"rely on gossip to solve your cases."* The freshly pacified Zhou Huaixin heard him, however, and bubbled with anger again. Gathering his fury in his core, he spat across the room, "Bull*shit*!"

By the time the spittle flying from Zhou Huaixin's lips landed, Luo Wenzhou, in all his impartial wisdom, had called over another officer. He pointed at Zhou Huaixin. "Question these two in separate rooms. Anyone who stands to gain from Zhou Huaijin's kidnapping in Yancheng is a suspect. Even family."

"What? *I'm* a suspect? Are you crazy?! Are you blind?!" This time, Zhou Huaixin's rage nearly blew the roof clean off. He turned to Fei Du, who wore a helpless expression. "Fei-ye, what's wrong with this officer? What's his name? I want to lodge a complaint about him! You

motherfucker. You'd better watch out—I can make your life a living hell! Calling *me* a suspect. I fucking—don't you touch me!"

"My mother *was* an old acquaintance of Zhou-lao's, that much is true," Yang Bo said, simmering with barely restrained anger. "And it's true that that relationship helped me find employment at the Zhou Group. But my current position resulted from my own hard work, not whatever obscene situation you're imagining."

Zhou Huaixin had completely given up on propriety. As two criminal investigation officers carried him off, he craned his neck to yell, "You're one to talk, you son of an obscenity!"

Yang Bo couldn't hold himself back any longer. "I don't know what counts as an 'obscenity' to a promiscuous, drunk-driving pothead like yourself, Mr. Zhou," he sneered.

Seeing that the two young masters were about to tear into each other right in front of the police, Hu Zhenyu ran over to restrain one and chase the other away, a vein all but popping out of his temple. He looked like he wished he could just bury them in a flowerpot together.

Fei Du watched with great fascination. He was just about to pick up his black tea again when Luo Wenzhou slapped his hand away.

"Did you just come to drink tea and enjoy the show?" Luo Wenzhou snapped. "None of your bad habits here. The criminal investigation team isn't your company; even if you're an embedded researcher or whatever, you have to follow orders. If you want to laze around, get lost."

Fei Du had clearly had ulterior motives for plotting his way into the municipal bureau, but—although his position allowed him to involve himself in various situations—he by and large saw himself as an external party. For a moment, Luo Wenzhou's sudden, discourteous slap stunned him. Never in his life had Fei-zong been treated as an underling to be pushed and ordered around. He didn't even know what expression to make at Luo Wenzhou.

There was a long pause. "Oh… What should I do then?" Fei Du asked, lost.

He was dragged into the group of technicians. Luo Wenzhou made him zoom in on every frame of the kidnapper's video and analyze each

pixel.

Compared to Tao Ran's combing of the Baisha riverside and Lang Qiao's scrambling all over, sitting and looking at video frames like this was a fairly easy job. Still, Fei Du grew sick of it in minutes. Even if it *was* simple, it was menial work—assembling clues into a beautiful conclusion was intellectually engaging, but actually finding those clues in the first place was extremely boring, since they were contained in a sea of useless detail.

Since Fei Du had spent the whole night rolling in filthy dough, he'd barely caught a wink of sleep before he rushed to the Zhou mansion to get in on the action. He was already tired; before long, his eyelids were fighting to stay open. He did his best, but he really wasn't cut out to be a subordinate; he got to his feet and paced, trying to keep his eyes open. Vaguely, he heard Luo Wenzhou ask Deputy Lu whether they should delete the video.

If they didn't, they'd be letting a criminal lead them by the nose—a terrible precedent to set. But they didn't yet have any clues. If they deleted the video, and the kidnapper really did act, they would have put the hostage in greater danger.

They couldn't do that. Human life was sacred. On the phone, even Lu Youliang hesitated.

Fei Du turned and smothered a surreptitious yawn. "If it were me, I'd delete it," he told Luo Wenzhou sleepily.

Luo Wenzhou looked at him out of the corner of his eye. He said a few hasty words to Deputy Lu, then hung up.

"Look." Beckoning him over, Fei Du opened the kidnapper's video and jumped to the part where the kidnapper drew Zhou Huaijin's blood and wrote on his chest. Fei Du propped an arm on the table and slumped bonelessly over it. "The kidnapper cut him first, then wrote on him with a brush in his blood. A little too careful for a kidnapper, don't you think? Personally, I'd have written it on his chest with the knife itself."

Luo Wenzhou had a hand braced against the back of Fei Du's chair. At those words, he looked down at him, blank-faced.

Fei Du gazed back with malicious interest, using the sergeant as a stimulant to stay awake. “When a beauty looks at me like that, I just assume they want to kiss me.”

Luo Wenzhou ignored this. “True, the kidnapper’s actions seemed a bit excessive. So?”

“So I don’t think the kidnapper wants to hurt Zhou Huaijin. They only want to exchange him for something, not become an internationally wanted murderer. And judging from the careful way they’re treating their hostage, he may be their only bargaining chip. Call their bluff, so that everyone can lay their cards out. If you delete the video, they might not do anything to him.”

“Oh, *might* not.” Luo Wenzhou gave Fei Du a look. “So when I write my report, I’ll tell them I calculated that the kidnapper *might not* have planned to harm the victim, so I decided to delete the video and see whether Zhou Huaijin would be killed. Is that what you mean, Fei-zong?” Before Fei Du could reply, Luo Wenzhou’s hand pressed against the back of his neck, and the sergeant bent down to speak in his ear. “My dear student, our line of work isn’t just about quick thinking. Everything we do must remain within the bounds of reason and the law. If you don’t understand what that means, you can ask me, your shixiong. I’m asking you to extract information from the video so that we can deduce where the kidnapper is—not play dou dizhu with online criminals!”

In his present boneless state, Fei Du was defenseless against the pressure Luo Wenzhou’s hand exerted. His chin almost hit the table.

Releasing him, Luo Wenzhou looked down with a smile that didn’t reach his eyes. “And you were mistaken. I wasn’t thinking about kissing you. That’s the look I have when I feel a bit like *punching* you. Next time you see it, keep your distance.”

Fei Du didn’t even have the time to object to Luo Wenzhou’s barbarism before a commotion broke out next to them.

“There’s a new clip, Boss!”

Luo Wenzhou put Fei Du aside for the moment and grabbed the earphones. Everyone in the Zhou mansion, including those still under suspicion, held their breath to hear the latest word from the kidnapper.

In this video, Zhou Huaijin was awake, but in a much sorrier state than before. His once stiffly styled hair was mussed, as if he'd been subdued after a struggle. There were now a few bruises on his face and body, and his face wore a look of shock and anger. The ropes binding him were tighter, and his shirt was stained with blood from his neck. His chest rose and fell visibly.

"Read," someone said off-screen in a mechanically distorted voice.

Zhou Huaijin's pupils constricted briefly. Then a vein pulsed in his neck. "You—"

The word had barely left his lips before someone kicked him over in his chair. The camera shifted wildly. All the viewers could hear was the impacts of fists and feet on a human body, accompanied by pained grunts and gasps. Then the screen went black.

A grave air descended over the internet police. They still had nothing.

Zhou Huaixin's legs turned to jelly. He forgot about his screaming match with Yang Bo as he grabbed the shirt of someone beside him. "Can we get a few hackers in? I'll pay! I'll pay any amount they want; we just need to get them. My brother—my brother—"

But after that brief blackness, the video lit up again. The camera was back on Zhou Huaijin, who was on the floor. "Read," the gravelly voice repeated.

Zhou Huaijin's lips trembled. This man had been born with a golden spoon in his mouth; he understood that he needed to protect himself, and he quickly gave in. Straining to look at some kind of sign offscreen, he read out haltingly, "I will ask you a question, and you need to…answer within t-ten minutes. Post the answer on the Zhou Group's homepage. I al-already know the answer. I-if you lie, I will…"

Zhou Huaijin took two harsh breaths and whimpered in the back of his throat. "I'll c…cut off part of Zhou-zong's body. We'll t-tear off the human skin and s-see what's beneath. Question one: Was Zh-Zhou Junmao a sanctimonious scoundrel who took in his bastard son and groomed him as his successor? Is…is this DNA report real? What?! You stole my—ah!"

The look on Zhou Huaijin's face changed dramatically at this point, and the kidnapper kicked the back of his head. Zhou Huaijin let out a groan

and flinched slightly, then stopped moving.

A sheet of wrinkled paper bearing DNA test results appeared on-screen. “Ten minutes,” the kidnapper ground out in that awful low voice.

The video cut abruptly, and a ten-minute countdown timer appeared.

For a moment, the entire house was silent. Everyone stared at the countdown as if it were a monster. Meanwhile, a bomb had exploded in the crosswires of the fiber-optic cables that made up the virtual world, its shockwaves crashing like a tsunami.

Zhou Junmao’s bastard son!

The Zhou Group successor kidnapped!

Real-life rich-family drama!

Within a minute, Luo Wenzhou’s and the Zhou Group personnel’s phones rang, as did the landline. The whole house was like a hotline’s call center; everyone wanted to extract firsthand information from them.

Luo Wenzhou looked down. Deputy Lu, whom he couldn’t ignore, was calling. Before Luo Wenzhou could so much as say hello, however, Deputy Lu exploded. “What’s going on? The kidnapper’s making a scene like this, and we still haven’t found them? If we haven’t got enough hands, ask other jurisdictions! I don’t care if you need to excavate all of Yancheng—find that bastard! My office phone is blowing up!”

Luo Wenzhou didn’t get a chance to brief his superior on the latest developments before Zhou Huaixin had sprung to his feet and seized Hu Zhenyu by the collar with one hand. “Respond! Respond! Hu-dage, put up an announcement in response and say yes—it’s true! That DNA test is real, and that shameless bastard Yang *is* his secret son!”

Yang Bo’s handsome young face paled. Thunderstruck, he froze under everyone’s gazes.

“Huaixin, calm down,” said Hu Zhenyu.

“My brother did the DNA test in secret. He showed it to me a while ago. There’s no two ways about it! They must’ve stolen it from his bag. You can’t argue with solid proof, Hu-dage! They said it themselves: They knew the answer before they even asked! My dad’s gone—what does he care

about a little smudge on his reputation? Don’t worry about airing dirty laundry. My brother’s safety is the most important thing!”

Zhou Huaixin’s shrieks filled Luo Wenzhou’s left ear while his right took in Deputy Lu’s steely, decisive orders: “Get this under control at once, or you’ll be writing me a disciplinary reflection letter when you come back!”

Shoving the officer next to him, Zhou Huaixin reached for the desk to grab his tablet. “If you don’t post it, I will!”

“Huaixin!”

“Mr. Zhou, don’t be rash!”

Fei Du was the only person present who held himself above all this, unconcerned. He couldn’t care less whether Zhou Huaijin lived or died, and no amount of pressure from superiors could trouble him. “Zhou-xiong,” he said, calm and unruffled, “I suggest that you avoid answering any questions. Whatever follows this one could be less easy to deal with, don’t you think?”

Zhou Huaixin looked at him helplessly. “Wh…what do I do, then?”

“Extract that part where Zhou Huaijin was kicked over,” Fei Du told a technician in an undertone. “It sounded to me like the floor was hollow underneath.”

Luo Wenzhou stared, stunned. He hung up on Deputy Lu and rushed to the screen. “Play the whole thing for me, sped up!”

Each frame flashed across the screen once again. Fei Du pointed lazily. “Look. Aside from the part where it went black, the camera stayed very close to the hostage. There wasn’t a single full-body shot. That means the space likely isn’t large enough to pull back—it might leak information about where he is… Huh. There’s a narrow range of movement on the horizontal axis too.”

Luo Wenzhou dragged the video back to the part where Zhou Huaijin was kicked over. Fei Du was right—he even fell over backward, rather than sideways!

Luo Wenzhou put a hand on the technician’s shoulder. “Can we estimate the range of the camera’s horizontal movements?”

“About five feet. No more than six.”

“Sergeant Luo! Listen to this!” Another technician played Zhou Huaijin’s chair falling over again. Something was strange about the ensuing thud. It was empty, almost echoing.

If the “floor” was hollow underneath, and the space was about five feet wide…

Fei Du pushed up his non-prescription glasses. “Could they be in a box truck?”

The words had barely left his mouth before Luo Wenzhou was calling Tao Ran. “The kidnapper might be in a box truck. It’d be starting and stopping as it traveled. Check the cameras around Baisha River. Put roadblocks on every route out of the city, and stop every possible truck.”

Then, keeping the line open, he called Lang Qiao on another phone. “How are things on your end?”

“We’ve locked on to the Hengda Group. Their status is close to the Zhou Group’s. Hengda was the biggest fish around until Zhou Junmao came back to China. The two groups butt heads a lot—the only time they tried to resolve their differences was when they worked together on a project, and even then, Zhou Junmao ended up kicking the Hengda Group out halfway through. They have an investment fund. The fund didn’t do anything last night—almost like they were too shocked to react—but this morning, they shorted the Zhou Group massively in foreign markets, intensifying the bearish attitude toward the Zhous—”

Before Lang Qiao could complete her report, Hu Zhenyu bellowed, “What are you doing?!”

Luo Wenzhou whipped his head around. When Hu Zhenyu wasn’t paying attention, Zhou Huaixin had stolen his still-unlocked phone and opened the Zhou Group’s official page using his account. By the time he was restrained, he’d already posted a single *yes*.

Chapter 6

"A BOX TRUCK?" Tao Ran said in Luo Wenzhou's ear. "Lao-Luo, Baisha River is part of the route from the pier to the Outer Ring Road—it's *all* cargo trucks. Do we stop the ones going in or out? It's been so long—would Zhou Huaijin still be in Yancheng?"

"Boss," Lang Qiao said in his other ear, "do I bring the person in charge back to the station, or check their emails first?"

Behind him, Hu Zhenyu pointed furiously at Zhou Huaixin. "You… *you*—! What have you done?! How could you be so reckless?!"

Next to them, Yang Bo's flush had spread down to his neck. "I'll sue you for libel!"

Luo Wenzhou was briefly robbed of his capacity for speech. There was a trite *Chicken Soup for the Soul*-type saying that "humans were given two ears and one mouth so that we would listen twice as much as we spoke," but Luo Wenzhou was realizing now that not even four ears would be enough.

Fei Du's gaze slid past Hu Zhenyu and fell upon Zhou Huaixin.

The muscles in Zhou Huaixin's neck were taut, and his face—gaunt, like a heavy smoker's—was shadowed by more than just the messy smudges of makeup around his eyes. Something indescribable had suddenly fallen over him, which paradoxically made him look more human.

"I don't care what they say out there. And I don't care about the…the market cap crashing or whatever. I don't understand that kind of thing, and I don't want to understand it, Hu-dage. All I know is that my brother is the only family I have." Zhou Huaixin's tone grew lower as he finished this declaration. He stared at Hu Zhenyu, who for some reason avoided his gaze.

Zhou Huaixin lifted the corners of his lips in a mirthless smile. "Not to be crude, but if the old man had the guts to do it, it was going to come out eventually. Like they say, you can't hide a fire with paper. Unless you really thought you could keep your reputations clean forever?"

This rendered Hu Zhenyu speechless.

“Can you find my brother within ten minutes?” Zhou Huaixin moved his eyes to the police around them. “Well, keep looking! What are you all fucking staring at me for? I’m the old boss’s son, and the beneficiary of his will. So I decided to sacrifice a little of the deceased’s prestige for the sake of the safety of the living—don’t I have that right?”

Suddenly, that sounded very reasonable.

“To keep my brother safe,” Zhou Huaixin intoned, red-eyed, “I’d call my own father a bastard. Life is about compromises. I can be the bad guy here. Even if my father’s soul is still alive under the soil, he’ll know to seek out the people trying to hurt our family—not me!”

Sweat glistened on Hu Zhenyu’s forehead.

Just then, someone at the door coughed heavily. “Yes, your family is limited to you and your brother, but the Zhou Group isn’t. How many business partners and minority shareholders do you think that big ship’s towing? Not even the old man himself would have dared to make a decision like this on his own. Who do you think *you* are, you useless brat?!”

Luo Wenzhou turned to look and saw the pack of Zhou Group employees at the front door parting quickly. A wizened old man ambled in. He was no more than five foot seven, and his hunch made him look even more shriveled and slight. Two deep lines bracketed his lips, starting at his nose; they split his chin into three sections, weighing down his mouth as if he’d never smiled in his life.

At the sight of the man, Hu Zhenyu rose to his feet almost instinctively. “Zheng-lao.”

Yang Bo inhaled sharply and rushed over, his large form shrinking like a young imperial eunuch’s in order to approach the old man with a more appropriate demeanor. “Zheng-zong, you’re finally here.” Zhou Huaixin glared silently at the old man, his lips curled into a sneer. Luo Wenzhou immediately recognized that this was Zheng Kaifeng, Zhou Junmao’s right-hand man.

Zheng Kaifeng walked into the Zhou family home as if it were his own; he strolled in at a calm pace and looked around, unfazed by the police

officers who filled the room. One look was enough to tell him who was in charge; he came straight toward Luo Wenzhou and extended his hand.

“Our misfortunes have burdened you. My apologies,” he said with the utmost sincerity.

This opening salvo astounded Luo Wenzhou. The police were here to investigate a kidnapping, so every member of the Zhou Group—Zheng Kaifeng included—was a potential suspect. Nevertheless, the old man made it sound as though the Zhous faced some great unknown evil and had sought out the police to help them.

Luo Wenzhou shook Zheng Kaifeng’s hand somewhat perfunctorily before twisting the conversation back on track. “Serious crimes are within our jurisdiction. That’s just our job—it’s not a question of burden. Our primary goal now is to save the hostage, then to reduce the negative impact this incident will have on society at large. When necessary, we’ll trouble the family to cooperate with us as well.”

The corner of Zheng Kaifeng’s eye twitched slightly, and his expression darkened.

Luo Wenzhou was apathetic by nature, inured to the powerful. He drew his hand back indifferently and turned to Zhou Huaixin. “Especially the younger Mr. Zhou. We understand how you all must feel. When there’s no other option, it may be necessary to give in to the kidnapper’s demands to ensure the hostage’s safety. But I hope that will always be the last resort. This announcement should only have been posted at the countdown’s final moment, at the very least.”

Zhou Huaixin scoffed pointedly.

“And Mr. Hu…” Luo Wenzhou turned to Hu Zhenyu with a smile. “Hu-zong, you called the younger Mr. Zhou reckless. But you were pretty anxious yourself, to log into that platform ahead of time. I think everyone should stop squabbling and give their official statement. Can I have a few of the officers here take each of them?”

His officers came as ordered and split up the Zhou Group executives, brooking no argument as they did so.

Although it was early autumn, and the room was air-conditioned, the sweat on Hu Zhenyu’s temples refused to dry. Zheng Kaifeng regarded Luo

Wenzhou coldly. “You certainly have your own way of doing things, young man.”

Luo Wenzhou grinned toothily. “I think so too. Thank you for the praise. Nevertheless, I specialize in serious crimes, so I certainly hope no other opportunities will arise to provide you with my services. Please, sir, this way.”

Having subdued the troublesome Zhou Group with a few words, Luo Wenzhou turned to see Fei Du watching him with a hint of a smile playing on his lips. As he caught Fei Du’s eye, Luo Wenzhou felt his heart skip a beat. Those peerless, once-in-a-generation peach-blossom eyes of his were so extraordinary; it seemed to Luo Wenzhou that Fei Du could coax the skirt off the moon goddess Chang’e herself, if only he had a telescope.

“You’d better say something useful,” Luo Wenzhou told Fei Du, feeling quite drained. “If you want to tell me how hot I am, or how infatuated you are with me, it can wait.”

“I want to pass on a message,” Fei Du replied. “The internet police say that they found a new clue about the person who posted the video.”

Luo Wenzhou paused. He’d been prepared for a prolonged standoff with the crazed kidnapper. “That fast?”

“Yeah—which is why I don’t think you should get your hopes up…” Fei Du paused, then for some unknown reason added, “Shixiong.”

Luo Wenzhou blinked. “Shixiong” was a perfectly normal form of address, and Fei Du had said it in a perfectly normal tone, so why did it sound R-rated? It was inexplicable.

But just as the internet police were celebrating over finding their perp, the unperturbed kidnapper uploaded a third video.

The angle was wider this time. It captured Zhou Huaijin’s entire body and allowed the viewer to see the space he was being kept in. They’d covered the entire space with black tarps; still, it was no more than six feet wide. Vertical room was limited too—the ceiling was probably about the height of a grown man. So they were in a box truck after all!

Fei Du stared, then looked up at Luo Wenzhou, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. Luo Wenzhou frowned in immediate understanding. Earlier,

the kidnapper had kept the camera very close to Zhou Huaijin, carefully avoiding anything that could show where they were—even as Zhou Huaijin was assaulted. Only when law enforcement had just deduced that the kidnapper was likely in a box truck were they given this view.

Had the all-knowing kidnapper bugged the Zhou family home? Or was someone in the room feeding them live updates?

"Get everyone in the room under control," Luo Wenzhou whispered to an officer, "including any servants walking in and out—cooks, housekeepers, even gardeners! On the double!"

On camera, Zhou Huaijin looked even more pitiful than before. He'd been splashed with water, and his whole head was dripping wet; no amount of poise could make him handsome now. Seemingly cowed into submission, he no longer wasted his words, just stared straight at the camera and read the kidnapper's message aloud. "'It's good that you're admitting it. I'll ask the next question. Ten minutes, like before. Why was the famous businessman and 'philanthropist' Zhou Junmao so generous and charitable? He had three charity funds under his name. Was that to show off, or to launder money? Zhou Junmao—Zhou Dalong—did you really imagine that you could become an aristocrat once you changed your name? That nobody would know what you were under that mask?'"

The venomous video came to an abrupt halt, and the countdown began.

The entire Zhou mansion was in a tizzy. All the occupants were isolated from each other, all the way down to the household staff.

At the same time, the internet police finally caught the person posting the videos.

Lang Qiao was in the heart of Hengda's headquarters when she received the message. She cast a single glance at the text, then pulled the handcuffs out of her pocket and slapped them over the wrists of the executive officer trying to argue with them.

"These guys are involved somehow," she announced. "Start searching!"

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A TEN-MINUTE TIMESPAN was both long and short. Two legs could run only a few flights of stairs in that period, but online, news circled the globe countless times. Information of dubious veracity burst out all at once. Some people swore up and down that Zhou Junmao used to be named Zhou Dalong; they even attached photos, along with an entire story about how he'd left the country to stay with relatives, run errands and worked under them, then started his business with a partner after making his first fortune. Those claims were followed by a question: Why had the Zhou Group's other founder disappeared without a trace?

The conversation turned from Zhou Huaijin's kidnapping to Zhou Junmao's strange car crash. The old philanthropist's impeccably virtuous reputation had fallen to pieces following the publication of a single video. Some now accused him of money laundering, others of selling out his country—there were even those who claimed he was involved in international human trafficking. It was like one big competition to put forward the most creative urban legend.

Since Zhou Junmao's accident was the focal point of the public attention, the driver who'd caused that accident wasn't spared from scrutiny. Internet sleuths unearthed Dong Qian's entire ancestral line. It was as if each strand of hair on his head might have hidden the truth about a deep conspiracy.

"Sergeant Luo, ten minutes is almost up."

"Take control of the Zhou Group's official website announcements and reply to the kidnapper as the police on behalf of the group," Luo Wenzhou instructed, then paused. "Say that financial investigators are looking into the situation and that they'll verify it. Tell people not to spread rumors, but that we welcome any reports of solid evidence. Remind the kidnappers that they should hand themselves in before the consequences turn dire."

"We can't, Boss! The Zhou Group website is lagging from too much traffic!"

Luo Wenzhou was speechless. The countdown had entered its final minute.

At that point, Lang Qiao called. “Boss, we found emails and payment records that prove Hengda was pushing the story and making the kidnapper’s videos go viral—”

“Don’t tell me they don’t know who the kidnapper is,” Luo Wenzhou interrupted.

“They say they don’t,” Lang Qiao confirmed promptly. “This morning, after Zhou Huaijin disappeared, Hengda’s PR department got a mysterious email along with a few blurry photos. They thought it was fake, but they didn’t really care—after Zhou Junmao’s accident yesterday, they wanted to seize the opportunity to muddy the waters—”

“And then the person who’d sent the email said that they were composite images, and they took the sender’s word for it and posted them, thinking that it was just a bit of competitor sabotage at worst. Right?”

Lang Qiao paused. “Yeah… That’s what they said.”

“Bullshit! If they thought it was all fake, why did they use so many anti-trackers? Bring in everyone involved! And keep searching for that email’s sender!” Luo Wenzhou glanced at the countdown. Time marched on coldly, trickling away like water through a sieve. The Zhou Group’s website was still lagging.

“Boss, look. We found this on the driver who picked Yang Bo up from the airport.”

Luo Wenzhou grabbed the cell phone. The suspicious driver had signed into an obviously new Weibo side account. Its latest status read, loud and clear, *The police figured out that the “meat” is in a box truck*.

The countdown clock hit zero, and the Zhou Group’s official page crashed.

Almost simultaneously, Lang Qiao caught the person who’d posted the video for the kidnapper, and the internet police raced to find the sender of the email. But at this point, the precarious balance and the thread of communication between the kidnapper and the police had broken.

As time ticked on, the internet was a sea of outstretched tentacles pushing against the tide, its gossip bubbling. To them, Zhou Junmao was no longer a human being; now, his life and experiences, along with every single rumor about him, were an open book. The public analyzed its every detail down to the last punctuation mark, and those details were listed bluntly for everyone to run their hands over again and again, to bite and chew and taste like it was the latest food craze.

Who is the bastard son officially recognized by the Zhou Group? Proof attached.

Who were Zhou Junmao's mistresses?

Zhou Group domestic shares (A-shares) hit the limit down as markets opened. Read about the differences in the regulation of A-shares and Hong Kong Stock Exchange shares.

The early demise of the Zhou Group's mysterious cofounder.

Zhou Junmao, aka Zhou Dalong: an underdog's improbable rise.

Zhou Junmao's late first wife was his cousin's widow? A list of famous wives in history.

Bastard son calls hit on father: a near-Oedipal story!

So much sensational news littered cyberspace that unless they blocked every mention of the name "Zhou"—thereby blocking one of China's most common surnames—they would never get rid of it all.

The zeroes on the kidnapper's countdown timer kept flashing. Now that the shit-stirrers at Hengda had been arrested, the kidnapper also ceased to make more public announcements, falling into uneasy silence. Countless eyes remained fixed on that motionless page.

With one hand, Luo Wenzhou pulled Yang Bo's driver up by the collar. "I haven't seen such a bold suspect in years. Passing secret messages right under the nose of the police? You've got the heart of a lion, buddy."

The driver looked to be somewhere in his thirties, with a flattop haircut and an average face. He wasn't bad looking, but his appearance was extremely forgettable: Even though he'd walked in behind Yang Bo, nobody had noticed him for ages. The legs of the suddenly captured driver

were now shaking so hard that he could barely stand. “I…I didn’t do anything. J…just posted on Weibo…”

“Using a new account and secret codewords. Who was it for?” Luo Wenzhou handcuffed him summarily. “Were you writing an online diary? Voicing your feelings into the ether?”

Fei Du turned quickly to give Luo Wenzhou room to maneuver, then shook his head sympathetically. “I know the person giving you orders is in this house—maybe even watching you right now,” he told the driver. “But please consider things wisely. If something bad happens to Zhou Huaijin, your position will look very different. What could they have given you for you to sacrifice yourself as a scapegoat? Did they promise you *themselves* or something?”

As he spoke, someone nearby shouted, “Sergeant Luo! News from the kidnapper!”

Right after they’d talked about bad things happening to Zhou Huaijin too. Luo Wenzhou stiffened. He really wished he could sew Fei Du’s prophetic mouth shut.

Losing Hengda’s technical assistance seemed to exhaust the kidnapper’s abilities. The fourth clip they posted was haphazardly shot, and this time, it was only a few dozen seconds long. The camera shook wildly as it captured a man’s profile—he was clearly one of the kidnappers, since he was covered in black cloth from head to toe, not a single hair exposed. The man held the camera in one hand, filming the other, which wielded a meat cleaver.

Zhou Huaijin did his best to curl up and shrink back. “I don’t know!” Terror had crystallized in his voice. “I never touched the Asia side of the business! That was all my dad and Zheng-zong. I really don’t know anything about any foundation… Stay away from me! Stay away—ahh!”

Then another voice came from off-camera—apparently that of the knife-wielding kidnapper’s accomplice. “Stop the video and hurry! They’ll catch up with us soon!” it urged, distorted by a voice changer.

The knife-wielder ignored this direction and lifted his blade slowly.

Flopping like a fish on land, Zhou Huaijin managed to stand up with his legs still tied to the chair and stagger backward. But the young man’s

motor control wasn’t very good, and he managed to trip over something and lose his balance. He fell sideways with a shriek and crashed out of sight.

Just as he fell, the camera jolted violently, as if the kidnapper had brought down his knife.

Everyone’s hearts sank, including Luo Wenzhou’s.

In the next instant, the camera stabilized again. Thanks to Zhou Huaijin’s fall, the cleaver narrowly missed him, lodging itself into the wall of the cargo box. The loud clang it produced suggested that the kidnapper was ready to chop Zhou Huaijin to pieces, and a rip had appeared in the black tarp.

As the kidnapper tutted, his accomplice panicked behind them. “Are you going to finish up or what? Hurry!”

Bracing himself for blood to appear on-screen, Luo Wenzhou lifted a hand to cut off Fei Du’s line of sight.

On camera, Zhou Huaijin began to babble. “No, no! Wait! I’ll talk, I’ll talk… You’re right! You’re absolutely right!”

The kidnapper paused, cocking his head slightly. The panicking accomplice swore. Then he must have pushed open the cargo-box door: A ray of light shone in, illuminating Zhou Huaijin’s face. Zhou Huaijin shut his eyes against the sunlight and squirmed on the floor, struggling, as he panted, “The Zhou Group has—th-three charity funds in Ch-China, but only one is a real charity, to cover things up. The others are fronts for money laundering and tax evasion. Supervision of international charities is full of gaps, so they’re hard to trace. It’s true! I swear! What else do you want to know? I’ll tell you everything!”

The kidnapper patiently waited for him to finish before nodding in satisfaction. Then, without warning, he lifted his knife and slashed downward.

“Ahhh!”

Despite the bloodcurdling shriek that came from the video, the audience didn’t see what had happened. The entire cargo box quaked violently as if someone had started the truck’s engine, and the video cut off.

Fei Du patted the back of Luo Wenzhou's hand, then turned to the cuffed driver, who had wet himself in terror. "See? What'd I say?" Fei Du spread his hands.

The driver's eyes rolled, and he slumped, deciding to faint. Unfortunately, Luo Wenzhou didn't give him the chance. He put one hand around the driver's neck, picked him up, and shook him like a rag doll. "I'll ask you one more time. Who are you working for? If you don't tell us, *you're* one of the primary suspects."

The driver's eyes flicked all over, as if he was possessed. "I-I…"

Luo Wenzhou abruptly let go of him. "Dig up his bank accounts, assets, close family—including children—and any recent contacts on his cell, landline, or social media accounts. I don't believe this!"

"Yang-zong! It was Yang-zong!" the driver screeched, his voice breaking. "Don't go looking for my kids. We don't know anything! I just did whatever Yang-zong ordered!"

"Yang-zong?" Fei Du leaned serenely against a rosewood desk. "Yang *Bo*? You mean, kidnapping Zhou Huaijin and publicly exposing Yang Bo's illegitimate birth was…Yang Bo's own doing? That *he* made you do this? What did he tell you to do?"

The driver had collapsed pathetically on a chair, his elbows on his knees. He covered his head with his handcuffed wrists, ashamed. "He just said…to create a new Weibo account, then post with it to tell *them* what you guys figured out, so that they could run in time."

At the words "in time," Fei Du narrowed his eyes.

"So you know where they are?" Luo Wenzhou probed immediately.

"N-n-no."

"Bullshit!"

"I don't! I really don't! I've always reported to Hu-zong, so I'm not really Yang-zong's guy—he doesn't trust me entirely. I just posted everything I heard and let them decide whether it was accurate. All I know is that they're still in Yancheng, because big trucks might get checked when they leave the city, especially with the police panicking over Zhou-zong

going missing. The risk of getting caught is too big. They'd rather hide in plain sight, s-since—"

"Since you're tipping them off anyway," Fei Du supplied.

The driver looked up at him, then quickly looked away. "They said they'd find a convenient place and drive straight into the river with everyone still inside. Then the kidnappers could smash open the windows, swim ashore, and run into the uninhabited wilderness. With the water covering their scent, not even dogs would find them. They'd be gone…like ghosts."

Luo Wenzhou turned and grabbed his phone. "Tao Ran. We're looking for a box truck weighing about two tons. Would've arrived at some point between yesterday afternoon and early this morning. Skip the ones that have passed through… Yeah, the kidnappers are still around Baisha River, within a six-mile radius. They're not near the shallows, any villages or populated places, or any flat terrain…"

"That leaves the protected forest in the northeast," Tao Ran quickly responded. "I'm barely half a mile from there."

"Put the siren on full blast," Luo Wenzhou directed. "There are two kidnappers. If they panic, they might start fighting with each other and give the hostage a chance to escape."

"Now this is a logical story," Fei Du remarked. "Yang Bo, a bastard son Zhou Junmao refused to acknowledge, climbed his way to the highest level of the Zhou Group with ulterior motives. Then he found an opportunity to get rid of Lao-Zhou, kidnapped Zhou Huaijin, and forced the company to officially recognize him as Zhou Junmao's son, enabling him to inherit." Fei Du took off his glasses and wiped them. "I'm curious: What did Yang Bo promise you?"

"My son," the driver choked out. "My son needs medical treatment abroad, but I have no money or means."

Fei Du shook his head with a look of deep disappointment. "How cliché." When Luo Wenzhou put down the phone and gave him a warning look, he changed his tune and became serious. "I mean, even if Yang Bo can give you money, couldn't Zhou Huaijin give you the same thing? Hell, even Zhou Huaixin could. So why throw yourself at Yang Bo's feet? You

were so quick to tell us that Yang Bo made you do it. How do we know you're not framing him?"

"What good would it do Yang Bo to work with outsiders, spread bad news about the Zhou Group, and devalue his own company's stocks?" Luo Wenzhou promptly added. "Does he only want to hurt others? Doesn't he also want to profit himself?"

"N-no! You've got it all wrong!" The driver shook his head frantically. "He said that once the company admitted that he was Zhou Junmao's illegitimate son, the website would crash, or they'd find a way to crash it. Then nobody could access it or post any announcements on it. That way, no matter what else the kidnappers asked about, the company wouldn't be able to admit to it, and he could g-get rid of…Zh-Zhou-zong fair and square. Otherwise, why would the kidnappers force them to use the official website instead of their Weibo account?"

"And after that, all he'd have to do is mourn Zhou Huaijin, blame everything on the crazy kidnappers, and say that whatever final accusations the kidnappers made were slander," Fei Du mused. "Then once the public was done with all the brouhaha and excitement, they'd remember to be 'politically correct,' stand against violence, and sympathize with the victim. The company wouldn't suffer any real structural losses. In the absence of Zhou Junmao and Zhou Huaijin, the only heir would be the little walking skeleton Zhou Huaixin—who isn't even worth mentioning—so it's obvious who the company would fall to." He opened his palms. "Sounds logical. A very holistic plan."

The driver stared at him, agog. He sensed that Fei Du was insinuating something else too.

Luo Wenzhou waved at his colleagues. "Take him to the station!"

***

AT BAISHA, POLICE CARS blaring their sirens split up across three roads, flying into the protected forest-hill area in the northeast, bringing the air of a raging battle into the quiet woods. The autumn rain of the past few

days had muddied the uninhabited wilderness, and the loose topsoil was waterlogged.

“Deputy Tao! We’ve got fresh tire tracks!”

Tao Ran wiped sweat from his brow. “After them!”

Baisha River had risen slightly, and the sounds of water grew louder and louder as the blurry treads drew them along the river to its bank.

“There!”

“In the water! In the water!”

A white box truck was half submerged in the water. Churning rapids slowly sent it drifting into the deeper section of the river.

***

YANG BO HAD BEEN TAKEN AWAY for solo questioning. Everyone else inside the Zhou family home held their breath and awaited news. Each wore a different expression and held a different motive in their breast. Only Zhou Huaixin—gripping the wooden armrest, his long, pretentious fingernails scratching the varnish noisily—seemed completely guileless and transparent.

Each second felt two weeks long.

“Sergeant Luo,” came Tao Ran’s indistinct voice over splashing water, “the truck’s cargo hold was open in the water, but no one’s in there. We’re not sure if the kidnappers took him or the rapids flushed him away.”

Zheng Kaifeng’s expression grew a little graver, and Hu Zhenyu’s back stiffened abruptly. Zhou Huaixin sprang to his feet. His pelvis struck the hard wooden desk, but he didn’t seem to feel it at all. The blood had drained from his lips; he looked like a pale clown who had been up all night.

“Keep looking,” Luo Wenzhou said, his voice low.

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TAO RAN HAD PLUNGED into the water himself; he choked, then coughed to clear his throat. “Keep searching!” he called to the other officers.

“Deputy Tao! Look over there!”

The kidnappers must’ve been startled by the sirens and driven straight into the water without properly closing the box truck’s door. Zhou Huaijin had floated out on his wooden chair, which had acted as an ersatz life preserver. As the chair floated over the waves like a leaf swept onto the river by the wind, the police couldn’t tell whether its load was dead or alive.

“Got him!”

“Hang tight, don’t let go! Wait… He’s breathing!”

***

TWENTY MINUTES LATER, news of Zhou Huaijin’s rescue had reached the Zhou family home. There was a slash on his leg, but the attack had missed everything critical—one frantic kidnapper had kept the other from carefully butchering him into pieces. Alarmed by the distant sirens, they’d immediately stepped on the gas and accelerated straight into the river. Now both kidnappers were gone without a trace, and Zhou Huaijin had drifted free in the current.

Hu Zhenyu heaved a huge sigh of relief. Zheng Kaifeng closed his eyes soundlessly. Zhou Huaixin fell flat on the floor and didn’t get up for a long, long time. At last, he rose and staggered into the bathroom to vomit his guts out from sheer anxiety. Someone walked in after him; thinking that it was the housekeeper, Zhou Huaixin reached out with his eyes closed. “Water,” he gasped hoarsely.

An uncapped bottle of mineral water was thrust into his hand.

Zhou Huaixin poured the water into his mouth, then heard a voice behind him say, “Seriously, Zhou-xiong? Didn’t you already know this was how it would end?”

Caught off guard, Zhou Huaixin accidentally swallowed the water he’d been gargling, making a choked *glug* sound. “Fei-ye.” Zhou Huaixin turned around a bit stiffly and forced a laugh. “What did you say?”

Fei Du turned to look behind him. The house was in chaos, with people rushing all around; nobody was looking their way. He shut the bathroom door. The light was dim, and the shadows cast his features in even greater relief, making him look like a painting executed with a fine brush.

“Drop the act. It’s not like I just met you today.” Fei Du leaned easily against the door and gazed at Zhou Huaixin, a half smile playing on his lips. “You only saw your father so many times a year. You’ve never cared about your inheritance or the legitimacy of your father’s children. I think the only honest words out of your mouth since yesterday were what you said when you grabbed Hu-zong’s phone.”

Zhou Huaixin turned so that his back was against the sink. He regarded Fei Du silently, his face dark.

“Even if Yang Bo really was your father’s bastard son, he wouldn’t have needed to create such an ordeal to prove it. Your father’s nice and settled in the morgue now—all Yang Bo had to do was come home and request the court order a paternity test. Why arrange a kidnapping and murder? Too much time on his hands?”

“You think that he could get a court-ordered paternity test just like that? And that my brother and I would just lie down and take it? We’d rather burn the old man completely than let Yang Bo get a single hair from his head.” Zhou Huaixin snorted. “Why would he arrange it? For money, of course. People with no pedigree need to count every penny.”

Fei Du shook his head. “The news about those three charity funds will be enough of a pain for you guys for a while. Even if it’s not true that they’re fronts, one audit would do them sufficient damage. If Yang Bo really wanted Zhou money, he wouldn’t cause you so much harm.”

“Like I said, I’m just a painter. I don’t know anything about what you businesspeople get up to.” Zhou Huaixin spread his empty hands

impatiently; then, taking advantage of his thin frame, he tried to squeeze past Fei Du to open the door and leave.

As Zhou Huaixin placed his hand on the door handle, Fei Du reached out to grab his wrist. Zhou Huaixin shivered. Fei Du's icy grasp felt like a snake, curling tightly around his pulse point where, despite his outward calm, his pulse throbbed wildly. While Fei Du was no strongman, he was quite able to deal with a stick of flax like Zhou Huaixin; one light push, and he'd pressed the other man against the cabinet.

"You—"

"Shh." Fei Du raised a finger to cut him off. "Quiet. The police are outside. The moment your poor driver opened his mouth, I knew it wasn't Yang Bo. We both understand how these things go: leave no evidence, buy a scapegoat, let him go to prison for a few years, and compensate him with more money than he could've made in a lifetime, plus his job back after the fact. It's not the death penalty—it's not much different from sending him away to a difficult post for a few years. No scapegoat would sell out his owner. Since there are no specific legal protections for whistleblowers in this country, he couldn't even escape punishment on those grounds; revealing what happened wouldn't just be a waste of a prison term, it would harm his family. That's not the way in our circles."

"I don't know *how* your circles work," Zhou Huaixin struggled to grind out.

"Don't play dumb." Fei Du poked him, smiling. "The very instant we guessed that your brother was in a box truck, the kidnappers stopped keeping everything around him out of the frame. Were you worried we'd be too stupid to recognize that there was a rat and suspect Yang Bo?"

Zhou Huaixin scoffed. "You mean someone's framing Yang Bo—kidnapping my brother and taking care of the bastard son all in one go. I see. And however you slice it, the only person this benefits is me, so now you suspect me, right? Why not tell the cops, then?"

Fei Du loosened his viselike grip and gazed at him quietly.

"Go on." Zhou Huaixin's voice was very low, but that crazed, devil-may-care look was back on his face. He smiled coyly at Fei Du. "There's no loyalty in our dens of sin. I wouldn't be mad at you for selling me out. If I

get locked up because of this, I'll always have bragging rights—as the greatest performance artist who orchestrated the grandest show!"

Fei Du sighed softly.

"Why are you sighing? Do you regret never sleeping with me?" Zhou Huaixin asked with a cheeky grin.

"I don't have the stomach for you."

"Of course not." Even at this point, Fei Du's words made Zhou Huaixin brim with pride. "Your passé tastes couldn't possibly handle someone as avant-garde—"

"I don't have the stomach for your stupid act. You're an idiot who thinks he's disguised himself as a clown," Fei Du said simply, cutting him off. "Just how close are you and your brother, Zhou-xiong?"

Zhou Huaixin's smile froze on his face. His fingers dug into the cabinet door behind him. "Now you aren't making sense, Fei-ye. You just accused me of kidnapping my brother and framing that bastard Yang Bo—killing two birds with one stone. Why are you asking me how close he and I are? Strange… Am I so beautiful that your mind is faltering?"

Fei Du ignored the bad joke. "After the kidnappers' first question, you snatched Hu-zong's phone—which was already signed in to the backend of your official site."

"Yup. Ha—can you imagine? Hu Zhenyu acted so steady and calm, but he was already prepared to expose that whole bastard-child story." Zhou Huaixin tutted. "Of course I had to seize the opportunity. The more emotional I acted, the less suspicion there would be."

"When I warned you to be cautious in replying to the kidnappers, you listened," Fei Du continued, paying no attention to anything Zhou Huaixin had just said. "But then you turned around and did that. How come?"

Zhou Huaixin lifted the thin line of one shaven brow. "You're asking __"

"Because you saw what Hu Zhenyu was doing," Fei Du carried on, his voice now almost inaudible. "At your esteemed company, with its standardized management practices, the official website would have a designated administrator, and every new post would need to go through a

fixed approval process. There's no reason Hu-zong would ever post this himself. It didn't make sense for him to log into the backend. So what he did confirmed your suspicions…"

Fei Du paused slightly. Zhou Huaixin's expression turned to stone, every line on his face as motionless as those on a mask.

"…that your brother hadn't been kidnapped at all," Fei Du concluded.

Zhou Huaixin's breath hitched. After a long moment, he let out a sharp sigh and shrugged so exaggeratedly that he nearly knocked his slender, reedlike neck off his shoulders. "So, Fei-zong, all that hard work with the police earlier was just you playing your part in the farce?"

Fei Du's phone lit up and began to ring. He declined the call without even looking. "For one thing," he continued, "if those two kidnappers were competent enough to use the Zhou Group's competition to fan the flames and send the story viral, why would they suddenly fall apart, like a turtle losing its shell, when they lost contact with the Hengda Group? And why did they let themselves get tracked by the police immediately after?

"Secondly, the Baisha River area is wide and sparsely populated, so it would've made sense to change vehicles there after kidnapping the hostage and leaving the airport. How come they lingered? Third, Baisha River is within Yancheng's borders. They wouldn't have been stopped and checked if they entered the city proper from there. Besides, no roadblocks were set up until after you made a police report. And you did that at least two hours after your brother was taken. So why didn't the kidnappers head into the city and find a safe, private, spacious room? Was the mastermind behind the kidnapping too poor to rent one?

"Fourth, leaving us a rat to catch—was that to give the kidnapper time to run, or to let us know the right moment to save the hostage? Your brother was up against a cruel, violent kidnapper. And when he gave in, his first reaction wasn't to threaten the kidnapper or try to buy his way out of the situation—it was to answer the question about the charity funds in full detail. What, did he think there weren't enough lawsuits against the Zhou Group? Fifth, two armed kidnappers drove their one completely defenseless hostage into the wilderness in a box truck—and not only did he survive, he managed to be saved by the cops?"

Pale, Zhou Huaixin struggled to speak. “If you insist on describing things like that—”

“Of course, the kidnappers contacted Hengda, so maybe Hengda was in charge when it came to misleading the police and publicizing the case,” Fei Du interrupted, enunciating each word. “You could say that the kidnappers chose Baisha River because they knew the region. After all, it’s not like we can catch those two and verify whether that was the case. And you might claim that your brother could tell that the kidnappers wanted to destroy the Zhou Group, so he cooperated to save his own skin—and just survived because he was incredibly lucky. But all those coincidences *plus* Hu-zong’s suspicious actions? Sorry if I’m just not imaginative enough, Zhou-xiong, but I can really only come to one conclusion.”

Zhou Huaixin’s expression changed repeatedly. “I apologize, Fei-zong,” he said at last. “It seems you’ve got the more active imagination. I simply can’t measure up.” He lifted a hand to stop Fei Du from speaking. “What makes Yang Bo so important? The way you describe it, Zhou Huaijin kidnapped himself, had himself wounded and half drowned, and even sullied the name of his own company, all just to frame that bastard? Is he sick in the head, or are you, Fei-ye?”

Fei Du snorted. “Zhou-xiong, do you really believe Yang Bo is your father’s bastard son? That, if such a secret talent existed, your father would have kept him close and groomed him to suffer humiliating accusations—yet never acknowledged him, for the sake of his dead wife? For the sake of something as superficial and illusory as his reputation?”

“If Yang Bo *wasn’t* his son, then how did such an idiot get where he is today?” Zhou Huaixin demanded, suddenly raising his voice. “With his body? He wasn’t the old man’s type.”

“I’m curious as well,” Fei Du said, his voice dropping. “Was that DNA test really Yang Bo’s? You don’t know, do you? Your brother showed it to you.”

“You’re suggesting that he managed to invent a bastard son under the watchful eyes of my father and that old fox Zheng?” Laughing, Zhou Huaixin reached out to pat Fei Du’s shoulder. “Give it up. That’s an even worse story than me kidnapping my brother. I know you’re a loyal friend, Fei-ye, but you don’t have to give me an out. I won’t turn myself in. If the

police are clever enough, they'll get to the bottom of this. And if you want to report me, go ahead; I don't mind. Ah—climbing the ladder, making a fortune, and losing your father—the three great things in life, as they say."[5]

Zhou Huaixin pushed Fei Du away, opened the bathroom door, and strolled out breezily, looking nothing at all like a conspirator who'd just had his scheme exposed. "Need me to cooperate with the investigation? Sure, I'll come with you to the station," he declared to the police who had been looking for him everywhere, cocky as a player with a royal flush in his hand. "What's the rush? Let me take my makeup off beforehand!"

Fei Du sauntered out of the bathroom in the corner as well. He gazed thoughtfully after Zhou Huaixin, who was sashaying off. Then a hand fell unceremoniously on Fei Du's left shoulder. He started to turn, but the hand gripped him and spun him around, making him stagger.

"Following a person of interest into the bathroom for a secret chat?" Luo Wenzhou stared into his eyes. "You'd better give me a by-the-book explanation for this. And why didn't you pick up when I called?"

Fei Du smiled, choosing the easier question to answer. "How come you're acting like you caught me cheating on you, Sergeant Luo?"

"Fei Du." Luo Wenzhou sighed, then reached out suddenly to grasp Fei Du's chin in his fingers. "Did you know," he murmured softly in his ear, "that you're really annoying when you act this way?"

Fei Du raised his brows slightly, a little surprised.

"If you don't plan on sharing the chicken drumstick in your hand, then don't deliberately get in other people's faces and chew. That's basic manners. You never had a grown-up teach you that?"

As Luo Wenzhou spoke, his other hand drifted downward to Fei Du's waist. It seemed to caress him without caressing him, like he was just gesturing without intending to touch him. He'd spoken the word "grown-up" so low that it drifted on a single breath into Fei Du's ear, coy and lingering, and continued to reverberate in his eardrum even as the sound of it disappeared.

"If you want it, follow through," Luo Wenzhou said, letting go. "This sporadic flirting is pointless and dull. Come on—let's pack up and leave."

Fei Du tugged unthinkingly at his collar. “If Yang Bo doesn’t admit to anything, then that driver’s word won’t be evidence enough, will it?” he asked, trying to act normal.

“No. Our next task is to look into all the driver’s financials and communications, keep Yang Bo until we can’t, obtain Zhou Huaijin’s statement, and get a sketch done of the kidnappers that we can put out. As for whether we can close the case properly, that’ll depend on the skill of our colleagues investigating the Zhou Group. Maybe we can, or maybe it’ll go cold.”

Fei Du thrust his hands in his pockets. “That doesn’t sound like something the leader of a criminal investigation team should say.”

“What should I say, then? That I’ll make sure justice is done after every single criminal act?” Luo Wenzhou paused, then spread his hands. “I’m not the Black Cat Detective.[6] That’d be a claim I couldn’t live up to. In this case, for instance, we might unravel the whole chrysalis eventually and find that the truth is something inconsequential, that it’s not even serious enough to toss anyone in jail to teach them a good few years’ lesson. Right?”

Fei Du smiled cryptically.

“Of course, a lot of things about this still piss me off.” Luo Wenzhou looked at him. “If you give me something useful, I can put aside whatever you and Zhou Huaixin did behind closed doors just now.”

“All right. Then I suggest you go put all the relevant people on no-fly lists, especially Zheng Kaifeng.” Fei Du paused. “Then check to see whether Zhou Huaijin and Yang Bo are both Zhou Junmao’s sons.”

Luo Wenzhou nodded. Snapping his fingers at Fei Du, he marched off.

Fei Du took out his phone. He hadn’t had the time to check it earlier, but now the internet was a roiling sea: The thrown rock of Zhou Huaijin’s declaration in that video had produced massive, crashing waves. Those waves hid islets where—concealed by the splashing water—countless hands took the opportunity to reach out and poach the ocean fish. Fei Du slowly spaced out, staring at the screen for a while, then called a number.

“Look into Yang Bo for me, especially his family background,” he ordered in a low voice. “The more details, the better.”

Chapter 7

DONG QIAN HAD LIVED in a residential area called Riverbend Billows.

The development was brand new. Just a few years ago, this had been a damp, narrow little alley; then it benefited from a large-scale makeover of the whole city. That allowed Dong Qian's family to move into a bright, clean relocation building.[7]

All the residences built there over the past few years had been very well-made. Terms that had previously been considered newfangled—such as "underfloor heating," "central heating," and a "dedicated outdoor air system"—were now common, and the new urban middle-class generation began to fork out for quality of life. They wanted good locations, quiet neighborhoods, services, and amenities. Without putting much thought into it, old residents rushed into agreements to be quickly relocated, finding shelter on the fringes of a "high-quality lifestyle" as if they had joined in on that that overarching urban trend.

Of course, only those who lived in this area knew that it was much prettier from the outside. The line dividing relocation residences and new builds sold by developers wasn't just thick—it created an airtight seal. On one side of that divide lay blank, unfinished concrete floors; on the other, splendid man-made scenery. Just like that, the carbon-copy buildings were separated into their many classes.

When Xiao Haiyang and his colleague emerged from Dong Qian's home, they found that a crowd had formed around their vehicle.

"That police car was already here early this morning," an old man with a dog said, pointing. "I saw it when I came out to buy breakfast. Who knows what they've been investigating for such a long time."

"Don't you know that a murderer lived somewhere around here? I saw it online. They found the address, and it's one of the blocks in this complex." A young man who looked like a student lifted his phone to show

the older man the screen. The old man squinted, regarding the sudden whirlwind of information with an air of confused reverence.

“Hey—are those two guys officers?”

Xiao Haiyang didn’t even have time to open the car door before the cacophony of the crowd engulfed them.

“Officer, we heard that a hitman lived here. Is that why you’re visiting?”

Xiao Haiyang froze, then shook his head repeatedly. “No. Don’t jump to conclusions. Let us through, please.”

“Is there really an illegitimate son?” the young man asked curiously, holding his phone aloft. He would’ve continued, but a fashionable-looking woman came up behind him and pulled him aside.

“Don’t listen to all that useless gossip,” she admonished him. “If that’s what you’re reading online, I’ll take your phone away. Say, Officer, I just have one question: Did the man who caused that car crash really die? Or did you catch him? Living next door to a killer—”

For an instant, Xiao Haiyang paused with his hand on the car door. Then he dove inside the vehicle without another word, pretending not to have heard her.

“Hey! Where are you going? I’m just asking a question! It’s very important to public safety!”

In a parked car nearby, a man grumbled under his breath, “I *said* we shouldn’t have bought property so close to those relocation apartments. You have no idea what kind of people live in there…”

Xiao Haiyang didn’t even wait for his colleague to shut the door properly before he stepped on the gas and shot out of the parking lot like a hound after a fox. But as soon as they’d left the grounds of the residential complex, they were greeted by a van bearing a media company’s logo. Xiao Haiyang’s sharp-eyed colleague quickly patted him to warn him. “Take the other, smaller road. We don’t want trouble.”

Xiao Haiyang turned down the narrow, winding back road. From the corner of his eye, he saw someone take equipment out of the van and dash after the car, the cargo they hoisted bouncing, only to throw in the towel

when it was clear that they couldn’t catch up, snapping a few photos of the police car.

Xiao Haiyang’s colleague looked back anxiously to make sure nothing else would come of it, then heaved a sigh of relief. “News travels fast. You know, Haiyang, things have really changed. If you run into something like this while investigating a case, remember to watch your mouth closely, and run if you don’t know how to deflect. We can’t say a word until the higher-ups make an official statement—that’s set in stone. If we do otherwise, the boss will kill us when we get back.”

Xiao Haiyang nodded stiffly. After a moment, he asked something that was almost a non sequitur: “Will Dong Xiaoqing still be able to live here?”

His colleague waved carelessly. “It’ll be hard for a while, of course, but after that it’ll be fine. Everyone’s busy with their own lives. Who’ll remember? Don’t worry—in a month or two, they’ll all forget.”

Xiao Haiyang hummed, his thoughts heavy. In sharp contrast to his quick, brash personality, he drove almost too carefully; he began braking as soon as he spotted the lights changing far away. The old police car came quietly to a stop without the slightest jolt.

“But *she* won’t forget,” Xiao Haiyang suddenly said.

His colleague gave him an odd look.

“If we never find clear evidence of either Dong Qian’s culpability or his innocence, it may haunt her forever. When people question or doubt her, she might argue at first and refuse to believe her father could be a murderer. But the thought will linger like a thorn. It’ll vanish for a while just to reappear at random moments, like Schrödinger’s box.”

His colleague hadn’t expected this sudden outpouring of thoughts. “Isn’t it ‘Schrödinger’s cat’?”

“The box holds a cat.” Xiao Haiyang stared at the traffic light. His glasses were slipping slightly, so that the frame obscured his eyelids; he had such gloomy eyes. “Day by day, if you don’t open the box, you don’t know whether the cat’s alive. That box will sit in a valve of your heart forever and keep you from putting anything else there. Every day, when the sun sets, you’ll think and think about the box, like it’s a fish bone in your throat—

you'll wonder every day… It'll hang above your head. It's a wound that'll never heal."

Most people's daily conversations consisted either of casual small talk or information that needed to be conveyed. In many Eastern cultures, sharing your feelings with people you weren't close to certainly wasn't a daily thing, and when the depth of your words exceeded the depth of your relationship with those people, that tended to make things awkward. Xiao Haiyang's colleague stalled, not knowing how to respond to such a long monologue on such an inexhaustible topic. He just let out a strained laugh.

But Xiao Haiyang didn't seem to pick up on this signal of awkwardness, nor even to expect an answer. Entirely in his own world, he shut his mouth and submerged himself in thoughts unknown.

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IN HER LIVING ROOM in Riverbend Billows, Dong Xiaoqing sat alone with her phone to her ear. On the TV, the local station buzzed with the explosive story of the Zhou Group. The surname of the driver concerned flashed across an unobtrusive ticker from time to time. Three cups of cold, half-drunk tea sat on the coffee table, evidence of the guests she'd had.

The voice of the HR manager on the phone was very kind. "Look, Xiao-Dong, you have a lot to deal with at home right now. Even if this is the busy season, we all understand. I've asked the bosses, and they all agree that you should take a break to adjust to things. Don't worry about work—it isn't urgent. If you have any problems, just let the company know, and we'll do what we can to help, all right?"

Dong Xiaoqing knew a polite dismissal when she heard one, but she didn't want to make waves. "Okay. Thank you taking the trouble, Mr. Wang," she said, doing her best to suppress the tremble in her voice.

"No, no, not at all." Mr. Wang seemed hugely relieved by Dong Xiaoqing's tact and how easy she was to handle. His tone softened further. "I didn't manage to help you much with this situation, but I did ask the boss to get you a full season's wages and benefits—"

Someone knocked at the door—a relentless drumbeat. “Is Miss Dong home? We’re from the *Yancheng Evening Report*. We’d like to ask you a few questions.”

“—so our finance department will wire that over to you in one lump sum. It’s not a lot, but it’s better than nothing. And if you need a reference, feel free to call me up.”

“Miss Dong…? Strange. I heard voices inside, so someone must be home… Hello? Anyone there?”

Dong Xiaoqing took a deep breath, cradling her head.

All these noises—over the phone, right outside—were like water flowing wherever gravity led. It bore neither goodwill nor malice, and only someone caught in the whirlpool, unable to escape, with water flooding every orifice, understood how it felt to drown in calamity. Even as they were submerged, they could not blame any single drop of water.

So whom could they seek justice from?

That was an age-old question that no one had ever answered.

Dong Xiaoqing didn’t even know how she’d finished the call from her company; she’d become a zombie, an automaton. By the time she’d recovered her wits, the people at the door were gone, and she’d wrenched her phone’s protective case clean off. She didn’t know when the breaking-news report had ended, but her TV was now playing a regular variety program instead.

She curled up in a daze, her dead eyes fixed on the phone number scrawled on a piece of paper under the teacups. The bespectacled police officer from earlier had left that behind, telling her to call him if she thought of any leads or met with any trouble.

What a phony, Dong Xiaoqing thought, her face blank.

Then the cacophonous doorbell rang once again.

Dong Xiaoqing started. An unnamable fury burst from her chest. She shot to her feet and seized the glass on the table, aiming at the door; the words “fuck off” were on the tip of her tongue.

“Delivery! Anyone home?”

Dong Xiaoqing paused. The glass rolled free of her primed fingertips and dropped onto the sofa, where half of its contents spilled out and dampened the cover. The person at the door tried knocking, then muttered, “Nobody’s in.” Next came a creak as they stuffed a package into the narrow electrical-riser compartment in the corridor per the usual routine and hurried away.

Dong Xiaoqing hastily pressed a few napkins against the sofa cover to absorb the water. After a moment’s hesitation, she peeked out the peephole and made sure that nobody was outside, then pushed the door open a crack and sneakily retrieved the parcel. It was well-wrapped and fairly light. She hadn’t bought anything, so who’d sent her a parcel at a time like this? Dong Xiaoqing checked the delivery slip, then froze.

The sender’s address was that of the logistics company where Dong Qian had worked. Her father was listed as both the parcel’s sender and its recipient.

Zhou Junmao’s death was a mystery. Since Dong Qian was a suspect, his personal effects at work and at home had all passed through police hands. The one exception, apparently, was this snail-mail delivery that had taken two or three days to reach its destination, even though it was within the same city.

Dong Xiaoqing rushed to tear the package open. The first thing to fall out was a black-and-white portrait of a dead woman. The same photo hung in Dong Xiaoqing’s living room: It was of her mother, who had died when Dong Xiaoqing was a child. The rest of the package consisted of photos of a horrifying car accident and a death certificate from the hospital after a failed attempt to save the victim. Under the certificate was a newspaper clipping, a report on the car crash that had killed Dong Xiaoqing’s mother.

Initially, Dong Xiaoqing had assumed this was a treasured keepsake of her father's. She was about to overlook it when a few lines in the report caught her eye. As if those lines had doused her in cold water, she woke instantly from her dull stupor.

The subject of the newspaper report wasn't the innocent woman who'd died in the crash but a businessperson who'd been famous at the time. That businessperson had been driving when a cargo truck rear-ended their sedan and sent it out of control; it hit another cargo truck passing in the next lane, causing a chain of crashes. Both the businessperson and the driver of the first truck had died at the scene of the accident, and the passengers in one of the passing vehicles affected had been Dong Qian and his wife. The couple was sent to the hospital, but the woman was in critical condition and later succumbed to her injuries. Only Dong Qian survived.

Dong Xiaoqing lifted her hand and hurriedly dumped everything else out of the package. It had contained an incomprehensible roadmap, a few oil-stained sheets of sketch paper, a photocopy of a large money transfer with no accompanying explanation, several license plate close-ups, and a stack of files that held some strangers' personal details.

One was on Zhou Junmao!

Under that summary of the man's life was a photo of the very Bentley he'd recently died in.

Dong Xiaoqing's heart pounded. Her hands shook uncontrollably. Under the pile of documents, she glimpsed an envelope labeled with crooked characters that read *Xiaoqing*. That was her father's own childish handwriting!

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AFTER ZHOU HUAIJIN'S KIDNAPPING, days passed in the blink of an eye, but public interest in the case didn't waver. In fact, the flames only grew higher. People unearthed every report and photo regarding Zhou

Huaijin’s early business activities. Even information on the Zhou Group’s mysterious cofounder was dug up again, decades after the fact.

“His Chinese name was Zhou Yahou… Wow, what a looker.” Lang Qiao paced the office. “He was of Chinese and American parentage, but he had more Chinese blood, and his wife was Chinese too. He was a second-generation immigrant from a rich family who dropped out of a big-name university to work. Back then, Zhou Junmao was just his subordinate, and Zheng Kaifeng was completely out of the picture—he’d only just snuck out of China when Zhou Yahou was building his own company, and he was a small-time gangster, so he was always skulking around and hiding.”

Tao Ran looked up, stunned. “Zheng Kaifeng snuck out of the country?”

“In his teens,” Lang Qiao confirmed. “He was an errand boy for a gang for a couple of years, but then he met Zhou Junmao, and managed to get his papers somehow. When you look at him today and try to picture how wretched he used to be—tsk. Life’s sure unpredictable.”

“Qiaoqiao, stop pacing,” someone complained. “You’re making me dizzy.”

“I’m hungry, Comrade,” Lang Qiao moaned. “My feeder’s late by ten minutes! My stomach’s digesting itself!”

No sooner had the words left her mouth than the scent of jianbing drifted in from the corridor. Lang Qiao sprinted to the door like a conflict-zone resident sighting liberating forces. “Boss!” she exclaimed passionately.

Luo Wenzhou sidestepped her. “Behave yourself.”

“Hungry children don’t need to behave.” Lang Qiao grabbed frantically at the food in his hands. “Why did you bring so many different kinds today?”

Luo Wenzhou remained silent, thinking, *Who knows what that fussy little Fei Du will turn up his nose at this time*.

It was Friday, meaning that Fei Du was in the office again. Luo Wenzhou had been buying breakfast as usual when he remembered that fact, which forced him to make a detour to buy other dishes. Now he was

late. He put on a casual air as he strolled into the office, but his expression grew serious at the sight of Fei Du's empty desk. "What's this? Didn't I tell him the rules? Tao Ran, give him a call. It's so late—where's he off fooling around now?"

Tao Ran almost rolled his eyes.

When he noticed the strange looks on everyone's faces, Luo Wenzhou was puzzled. "Why are you all looking at me?"

Lang Qiao pointed at the coat hanging over Fei Du's seat and "lowered" her voice to a whisper everyone could hear. "He arrived half an hour ago. He just left for the big boss's office."

Luo Wenzhou blinked.

"Oh, right. By the way, Deputy Lu called your office phone earlier," Tao Ran added languidly. "I picked up, and he gave me a long lecture. Asked me 'When will Luo Wenzhou be cured of his carefree attitude?'"

The criminal investigation team sighed as one into the breakfast Sergeant Luo had bought them, and Luo Wenzhou winced.

Chapter 8

FEI DU WAS AS WELL-BEHAVED for Deputy Lu as he was wicked around Luo Wenzhou. He wore clothes that gave him the air of a student, though they had cost much more than a student could afford. Lu Youliang, who had no knowledge of expensive clothing, just thought that the young man looked exceptionally clean and spirited. When Fei Du came in, smiling, the office itself seemed to brighten. If the boy could just crop his hair short, he would be perfect.

Lu Youliang handed Fei Du the index of requested documents from Yancheng PSU. “I skimmed it. Shouldn’t be too much trouble. I’ve marked the superfluous ones, so just edit those out, print a new copy, and run it through the necessary procedures.”

Fei Du thanked Deputy Lu as he took the index. He swept a glance over it, but before he had a chance to ask, Lu Youliang began to explain. “The ones I canceled out were old. The last go at the Sketchpad Project already studied those, and they weren’t very useful. I don’t want your team to retread old ground. If your Dr. Pan asks, tell him that. He’ll understand.”

Not even the least busy bureau director in the world would be so thoughtful as to personally inspect such a list to ensure his subordinates didn’t have to do redundant work. Fei Du wasn’t stupid; he knew an excuse when he heard one. But he also recognized that the man didn’t want to explain himself, so he considerately swallowed the question on the tip of his tongue.

With business out of the way, kindly old Deputy Lu began asking about Fei Du’s personal life. Just as they were about to move from his studies to his love life—a favorite topic of the elderly—the phone rang. Deputy Lu gestured at Fei Du and picked it up.

Two sentences in, he started to frown. Fei Du watched quietly, listening as Lu Youliang issued detailed instructions. “…be objective and fair, and be very, very careful what words you choose. Once you’ve drafted it, show me… All right. This one needs to be fast. Rich people fighting over an inheritance is news for a few days, and a violent fight won’t get in the

way of your next meal anyway, but what the public really cares about is children."

After he hung up, Fei Du asked, "Was that about the serial kidnappings?"

"Ah—yeah. We've handed that off to the public prosecutor, so the rest is out of our hands." Lu Youliang paused, then mused on the case aloud. "Sometimes, in our line of work, it's just like that. Victims are waiting desperately for you to give them justice, and you *know* who did it, but the outcome isn't satisfying. It could be bad luck, a case where you can't get enough evidence. But sometimes all the evidence is there—it's the law that can't give you the solution."

Fei Du nodded. "Processes and procedures are part of a fixed framework. There will always be situations they don't fit." The corner of Lu Youliang's eye twitched, as if he sensed that he'd object to Fei Du's next words. Instead, Fei Du just continued, "But that framework was produced by constant use, and it offers the maximum utility to the most people—it's Pareto efficient, essentially. Without it, we'd be a less just society. So it's a framework we need to uphold, even knowing that, sometimes, some people will be hurt."

Deputy Lu blinked. "Sorry—it's *what*-efficient?"

"In short, it's the best choice for everyone's collective benefit." Fei Du smiled. "My family runs a small business, so I've learned a few things from my elders."

Deputy Lu nodded slowly, seeming to breathe a sigh of relief as he eyed Fei Du's calm, relaxed expression. "Broader learning is good for young people. It helps keep you humble. Your Dr. Pan was an angry young nationalist back in the day, before he changed tack and went into teaching." Although Fei Du demonstrated an adequate amount of curiosity at this, Deputy Lu said nothing more, simply waving him off. "All right. Go do your work."

Fei Du stood; at the same time, his gaze swept down toward Deputy Lu's desk. In the corner of the desktop was a frame containing a group photo. The men in the image all had thick hair and rather "restrained" waistlines; only the barely visible shadows their features cast distinguished them from each other. From left to right, the photograph showed Deputy

Lu, old Director General Zhang, Pan Yunteng, whom Fei Du had gone to great lengths to work under, and Luo Wenzhou's late shifu, Yang Zhengfeng.

There should've been five people in the photo—Yang Zhengfeng's right arm was raised to tug on someone's elbow—but the wooden frame blocked the fifth person's face, so only a bit of his skin was visible. Fei Du's eyes barely touched the photo before they slipped away from it. Apparently disinterested, Fei Du reached for Deputy Lu's redacted list of requested case files, then headed back to the criminal investigation team's office.

As he mulled things over, his footsteps were soundless and careful, as if he were treading upon this vague hint of a clue. The long, tapered ends of his peach-blossom eyes drooped, giving him an air of unfocused indifference—until he heard Luo Wenzhou's anguished voice.

“Traitors!” He didn’t know whom Luo Wenzhou was accusing, but his words were clear even several paces from his office door. “This is a textbook case of treachery!”

Looking up, Fei Du saw Luo Wenzhou backing out of the room toward him, his hands in his pockets. Then the sergeant pointed at the ingrates inside the office. “I suspected as much. None of you are my actual children—”

He backed into Fei Du, who hadn’t bothered to get out of his way.

“Oops. Sorry,” Luo Wenzhou said, not realizing whom he’d walked into. Just as he was about to turn, an arm reached out from behind, curling around his waist in a half hug to keep him from falling over.

Fei Du leaned forward slightly. “No worries,” he murmured.

Luo Wenzhou froze.

There was a great expanse of corridor Fei Du could have walked along, but he chose instead to turn sideways and slip through the narrow space next to Luo Wenzhou. Bumping the sergeant with his shoulder almost imperceptibly, he lifted his hand and ran it along the curve of Luo Wenzhou’s waist as if measuring it. “Deputy Lu said to tell you that if you’re late again, he’ll dock your bonus,” Fei Du said innocently.

“Fei-zong, just now, the boss asked where you were off fooling around,” the drama-loving Lang Qiao revealed.

“Fooling around?” Fei Du grinned. “At Deputy Lu’s age? Don’t slander him like that.”

“Have you eaten?” Tao Ran gestured at the breakfast food heaped on the desk beside him. “Take anything you want. I’m not sure what you don’t eat.”

Fei Du had gotten up bright and early to prepare for work; naturally, he’d factored in breakfast. “Nah. I—”

But as the words “already ate” reached his throat, Tao Ran added, “Wenzhou bought it, so you don’t have to be shy.”

“—eat everything. There’s nothing I don’t eat.” Finishing his sentence with a one-eighty, Fei Du picked up a pastry filled with red-bean

paste. “Thank you, Shixiong.”

What a shameless man! Luo Wenzhou was absolutely speechless in the face of this blatant lie.

Xiao Haiyang sat at his cubicle in the corner, listening to everyone joke around fearlessly. He didn’t know how to join in, so he simply watched, detached and uncomfortable. When Tao Ran turned, he noticed this. Meeting his gaze accidentally, Xiao Haiyang automatically pushed his glasses up, bowing his head to feel secure again. He tried to look focused on his work to minimize the others’ attention on how poorly he fit in, and to make his awkwardness less obvious.

Tao Ran poured himself a beverage and walked over to Xiao Haiyang with it. “Xiao-Xiao—”

Xiao Haiyang automatically hastened to sit bolt upright. “Deputy Sergeant.”

“You don’t have to be so cautious.” Tao Ran patted his shoulder, leaning casually against his desk. “This isn’t Wang Hongliang’s territory. Relax.”

Xiao Haiyang didn’t have the slightest intention of doing that. He remained stiff as a board as he listened nervously to Tao Ran’s advice.

Tao Ran sighed inaudibly, then glanced at the two postmortem reports on Xiao Haiyang’s desk. They belonged to Zhou Junmao and Dong Qian. Both had died in the crash; there was no hint of suspicious infirmity or drugs in either body. On that point, there was absolutely no doubt.

“We questioned Zhou Huaijin the other day,” said Tao Ran, trying to use work to break the ice with Xiao Haiyang, so that he would relax. “He said that he got into a taxi driven by one of the kidnappers. When they reached a quiet area, another man tried to hail the taxi and asked to share the ride—that was the second kidnapper. Zhou Huaijin thought it would be inconvenient and refused, but he wasn’t overly cautious, and the kidnapper pretending to be a potential customer took the chance to hang around and attack Zhou Huaijin with his co-conspirator’s help—hey, Xiao-Xiao, no need to take notes. This isn’t an actual meeting; I’m just making conversation.”

Lang Qiao pulled her jianbing's crispy filling out with her teeth and munched on it like a squirrel. "I think something's wrong with that story," she broke in, still chewing. "How could the kidnapper have been sure that Zhou Huaijin would take his car?"

Tao Ran mulled that over. "We checked the security cameras for the airport taxi stand. It was the middle of the night, so no one was on duty, and there weren't many customers or taxis—just one row of each. If the kidnapper had arrived early, waited, and cut in at the right time, picking Zhou Huaijin up wouldn't have been hard."

"He *could* have done that, but it definitely wouldn't have been a sure thing. What if a different customer cut in the line too?" said Lang Qiao. "You know, Yang Bo got so fed up with us taking turns interrogating him yesterday that he broke down in the interrogation room and yelled that Zhou Huaijin's kidnapping had been faked by Zhou Huaijin himself."

"No way," another officer exclaimed. "Why would a rich heir arrange to get beaten up and almost washed away by the current? He also tarnished the company's name so publicly that the whole city's talking about it and regulators are investigating. Why would he make things so hard on himself?"

"What if the Zhou Group isn't necessarily going to end up in Zhou Huaijin's hands?" Lang Qiao asked.

Tao Ran set down his teacup. "What gossip are you reading now?"

"Gossip? I spent half the day yesterday looking through old newspapers. Just a few months after the Zhou Group's founder, Zhou Yahou, died, his widow quietly married Zhou Junmao. Imagine—the older cousin had just died, and the younger one married the deceased's wife, who held most of the company's shares. Sounds pretty awful, right? I found a contemporary news report from a media source in Hong Kong that called the couple Ximen Qing and Li Ping'er[8] and claimed that they were together even before Zhou Yahou died." Lang Qiao rapped on the desk. "Here's the kicker, pals: I checked to see when Zhou Yahou died and when Zhou Huaijin was born. The dates were in the same year. Very interesting, I think."

“You’re saying Zhou Junmao killed Zhou Yahou and accidentally raised Zhou Yahou’s son, and now Zhou Huaijin’s discovered the truth and wants revenge?” Tao Ran shook his head. “Focus on the case, Xiao-Lang. Didn’t I ask you to look for potential witnesses from the taxi stand? All you’ve been doing is making wild guesses. Can you get some actual work done?”

“This isn’t a wild guess,” Lang Qiao insisted. “When we left the Zhou house that day, the boss went to see Director Zeng about the biological relationship between Lao-Zhou and his three alleged sons—didn’t you, Boss? Great minds think alike and all that!”

Luo Wenzhou walked into his own office, neither confirming nor denying Lang Qiao’s claim. “Stop looking at me and go do your work. We haven’t even received the test results.”

At this point, Xiao Haiyang finally spoke up. “But Dong Qian and Zhou Huaijin never interacted. If Zhou Junmao’s crash really was premeditated, how did Zhou Huaijin convince Dong Qian to give up his life for it?”

“Dong Qian didn’t have contact with anyone else from the Zhou Group either,” said Lang Qiao. “We broke this down before. If Zhou Junmao was murdered, the killer’s methods were secretive—they tried to get away with the murder by making it look like an accident. On the other hand, Zhou Huaijin’s kidnapping was as public as you can get—like the perpetrators were afraid of people *not* knowing about it. That’s clearly contradictory. So I think maybe Zhou Junmao’s death really was accidental, and Zhou Huaijin just took it as his opportunity to destroy Zhou Junmao’s name too.”

The look on Xiao Haiyang’s face was solemn and contemplative.

With a wave of his hand, Tao Ran interrupted everyone’s boundless imaginations. “We need to follow where the evidence leads us, not make up stories. All right—if you’re done eating, get back to work.”

A police sketch of the kidnappers as described by Zhou Huaijin had been released, but that turned out to be like throwing a rock into the ocean—it didn’t bring in any tips. No reliable witnesses had emerged either, and the box truck in Baisha River turned out to be a stolen vehicle that didn’t yield any valuable clues, much like the stolen taxi. The investigations into

Zhou Junmao's accident and Zhou Huaijin's kidnapping were both full of unanswered questions and making very little progress.

Everyone seemed suspicious. Yet apart from the driver who'd leaked information to the kidnappers and been arrested at the Zhou house, none of those suspicious parties gave themselves up; all they did was attack each other. While everything they shared sounded like a damning disclosure, none of it was backed by actual proof. Even Yang Bo, whom the police had focused on, was freed from custody by his lawyer yesterday evening due to their lack of evidence.

The criminal investigation team hit a wall. All they could do was wait for the financial investigation into the Zhou Group to conclude and hope that it yielded clues or possible motives.

Luo Wenzhou read through each suspect's statement. Zhou Huaixin had been like a mad dog, but one that only bit Yang Bo. Yang Bo said that Zhou Huaijin deserved it. Hu Zhenyu had seized his chance and waded into the muddied waters, claiming that Zhou Huaijin and Zheng Kaifeng had had disagreements about company strategy—and that Zheng Kaifeng had grown a lot closer to Yang Bo in recent years. Meanwhile, Zheng Kaifeng himself refused point-blank to admit that Yang Bo was Zhou Junmao's illegitimate son; the sly old fox's statement was crafty and evasive.

As Luo Wenzhou rubbed his chin, his phone vibrated. He looked down.

It was a text from Fei Du, who sat across from him. This office was so tiny that you couldn't even fart without it hitting someone else, but Mr. Fei had elected not to open his lips to speak; instead he just had to waste the office Wi-Fi on a WeChat message.

Quoth the WeChat message: *Can we go out tonight, Shixiong?*

Luo Wenzhou looked up. Fei Du seemed completely focused on his laptop. But for the suspicious smirk on his lips, he could really have been hard at work.

Then the hardworking Mr. Fei moved his fingers, and another WeChat message slammed into Luo Wenzhou's sightline. It read, *Nice abs.*

Luo Wenzhou glanced at the office door that he could never close. In this almost-open space, people talked on the phone, openly wandered

around, and occasionally jogged over to grab a drink and even to chat with Fei Du a little if they were talkative. Every single movement a person made was visible to everybody. And in this public environment, someone was secretly harassing him with flirtations.

His throat felt tight. From behind his monitor, he gave Fei Du a look with a carnivorous tinge. Just as he picked up the phone to text back, an oblivious colleague burst in and exclaimed, “Director Zeng asked me to hand you this, Sergeant Luo—bet you’ve been waiting!”

Luo Wenzhou almost dropped his phone on the floor, but his colleague didn’t notice the strange atmosphere, just tossed the folder onto Luo Wenzhou’s desk and dashed off like the wind.

Coughing, Luo Wenzhou pulled back his legs—which had been stretched out under the table—and opened the file absently. Then his eyes fell on the words it contained. The DNA results showed that both Zhou brothers had been born to Zhou Junmao, while Yang Bo had no blood connection to him whatsoever.

“Is Zhou Huaijin still in the hospital?” Grabbing his jacket, Luo Wenzhou stood. “I need to have a word with him.”

“I’ll go with you,” Fei Du said.

Luo Wenzhou glanced over at him. Fei Du licked the corner of his lips and let his eyes drift a short distance across the office. He didn’t speak, but his body language implied that there were too many people around. Luo Wenzhou paused, then allowed him to follow.

Moments after they left, Xiao Haiyang received a text from Dong Xiaoqing. He was taken aback; he hadn’t expected her to contact him of her own volition. The text read: *Officer Xiao, please come to my place. I need to give you something.*

He hastily called her, but she’d switched her phone off. Suddenly, a bad feeling tugged at him.

“Deputy Sergeant Tao.” Xiao Haiyang sprang to his feet. “I need to head out for a bit.”

Chapter 9

ROBBERY, ASSAULT and battery, murder… The motives for and results of these actions were so intuitive, and the legal punishment for them so clear-cut, that as long as you caught the perpetrator and found enough evidence, the victim would get some closure.

But in some situations, closure was less easily guaranteed.

If, for instance, someone threw rocks on a highway for fun, causing an innocent driver to die in a crash; or if someone stole a manhole cover along with some streetlight wires, causing someone else to walk into the hole and die; or if perhaps one of society's elite made a simple, dispassionate decision, causing someone to lose everything, and the bankrupted individual then killed themselves in despair—in those cases, where could a satisfying resolution be found?

Tragedy didn't distinguish between the poor and the upper class, just as there was no difference in their loved ones' grief and anger. Maybe they could find solace in watching those who'd caused the victims' death suffer crushing guilt for the rest of their days, but in truth, the guilty parties generally just didn't have conscience enough for that. Faced with intense self-condemnation, they usually chose to numb themselves, building a defense from several excuses:

"I didn't mean to."

"It wasn't personal."

"I didn't think that would happen."

"In a way, I was a victim too…"

"Why were they so unlucky?"

"At the end of the day, the real killer was fate."

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THE MUNICIPAL BUREAU'S police car was afflicted with various ailments—the steering wheel never straightened out; the brakes responded so slowly that you always felt like you'd rear-end the car in front of you if you weren't careful; the whole vehicle gave off a sad, exhausted air like it was ready to go on strike at any moment. Luo Wenzhou figured that Fei Du, with his spendthrift habit of treating his luxury vehicles like bumper cars, would blow up at it in about two seconds. But surprisingly—despite a slight frown as he started driving—he became fast friends with the doddering senior; he didn't look awkward at all.

Noticing the route Fei Du was taking, Luo Wenzhou couldn't help asking, "Where are we going?"

"A private institution called Heng'ai Hospital," said Fei Du. "Zhou Huaijin was at the public hospital for a day, but the night he recorded his statement, he transferred to the private hospital his company owns shares in. His brother said that a noisy environment is bad for Zhou Huaijin's recovery, but I think he's just avoiding the media."

"Didn't he just get a little cut on his leg? Tao Ran said it wasn't anything serious. I object to such wasteful use of medical resources." Luo Wenzhou pointed at Fei Du. "You people should watch out—profligate spending on luxuries is a slippery slope to degeneracy!"

Fei Du had an issue with acting normal for too long. He couldn't be serious for more than three sentences at a time or he would shut down. When he heard Luo Wenzhou's lecture, he began to tease. "A private hospital is too luxurious? What about having you in my car—wouldn't that justify a trip to the guillotine?"

Luo Wenzhou—who had obscured most of his face with a pair of sunglasses—couldn't help but sigh at this, putting on his most proper and sober expression. "Darling, your lines are so corny that I'm the only person shameless enough to put up with them without cringing. Is this how you get all your little fools into bed with you? No wonder it always goes so well."

Fei Du put away his somewhat line-crossing look, smiling wordlessly.

Yancheng's judicial and public security buildings were all near the city center, and therefore near each other, so Fei Du's alternate route happened to bring their vehicle past the public prosecutor's office.

The early autumn air was dry; the few clouds in the sky, floating high and far above them, did nothing to limit the sun's tranquil rays. As the police car quietly passed the back gate of the prosecutor's office, they spotted a middle-aged woman standing by the road. She held a bottle of mineral water, with a poster hanging from her neck that showed several smiling girls. The woman's unfocused eyes automatically followed the police car as it passed, clouded by a deathly befuddlement.

"That's Qu Tong's mother," Luo Wenzhou told Fei Du after a glance. "I remember her from when she made her report and gave her statements. How did she age so much in just a few months?"

"Deputy Lu talked to me about that earlier today," Fei Du replied.

"Huh?" Luo Wenzhou stared.

Fei Du paused, then continued almost too casually. "It might just have been me, but I felt like he was probing my thoughts."

Luo Wenzhou didn't turn his head, but his eyes slid over to glance at Fei Du under the cover of his sunglasses. "What thoughts?"

"Don't know. It felt like…maybe he thought that I'd approve of the victims' family members taking out hits on Su Luozhan and those pedophiles." Fei Du shrugged. "Why? Do I look like I have that strong a sense of justice?"

For a moment, Luo Wenzhou didn't reply. Then he sat upright from his lazy slouch, his whole body tensing as he threw his ankle over his knee.

"He also refused to let me access a few old cases I wanted to look at," said Fei Du. "I tried to guess roughly why. It's a big coincidence, but all those cases involved some kind of flaw—a frustrating lack of evidence, or a suspect's medically verified plea of insanity—"

"Fei Du," Luo Wenzhou cut in with a laugh, "was the old man probing? Or are *you* trying to weasel something out of *me*?"

The lights at the quiet intersection turned from amber to red, and Fei Du slowly pumped the brakes.

“I do know something about the matter. Shifu accidentally let some things slip when he was drunk once.” Luo Wenzhou was silent for a moment. “I’m guessing the cases Deputy Lu denied you access to were the ones the last iteration of the Sketchpad Project studied?”

Surprised at how forthcoming Luo Wenzhou was being, Fei Du shot him a look.

“Aside from the one involving the insanity plea, those are all cold cases. The person leading the project back then wanted to analyze them from a different angle in the hopes of a breakthrough. But given the limitations of technology, a lot of evidence was lost to time, and criminal profiling was nascent and lacked credibility—it wouldn’t have been admissible in court. So those cold cases ended up as pure research material; there was no hope of actually bringing the perpetrators to justice. The specialists and veterans involved in the Sketchpad Project were frustrated, of course—but then all the suspects involved started getting into accidents, one after another.”

Fei Du’s eyes narrowed slightly. “What kind of accidents?”

“They died under bizarre circumstances, or went missing—one killed themselves and left a note admitting their guilt. The people whose names appeared on the Sketchpad Project participants’ desks started to vanish, one by one. It was too coincidental. Assuming that it wasn’t a sudden act of god, that could only mean one thing: murder. But the murderer was extremely clever—they seemed to understand the deceased better than the deceased themselves—and so familiar with police methods and procedures that it could only have been one of our own. So the Sketchpad Project was quickly halted. The bureau assembled a secret special investigation team, and everyone involved was suspended and investigated.”

Now Fei Du understood why Luo Wenzhou had dodged Tao Ran’s question about the Sketchpad Project at lunch the other day. All the people involved must have been the cream of the crop—academics and specialists at the top of their fields. Those who hadn’t retired were probably still highly respected veterans. “Then what happened?”

“The special investigation team found their suspect,” said Luo Wenzhou. “Exactly what happened, I don’t know. But they had no evidence

to use as grounds to charge him. The accused was the heart and soul of the project. A lot of the other people involved back then were his students."

"Who was he?" Fei Du immediately asked.

Luo Wenzhou shook his head. "I'm not sure. Yang-lao never told me, and when I tried to look into it, his case had been sealed. But from what Shifu said, it sounded like he's dead."

"You're not sure," Fei Du repeated softly. "That means you found something."

Luo Wenzhou neither confirmed nor denied it. "Now that I've told you all that, it's your turn to put your cards on the table. Why did you get yourself into Yancheng PSU, and why did you spend all that time and effort getting involved in the revived Sketchpad Project? Don't tell me you were just bored and curious."

Fei Du fell silent.

They were shoulder to shoulder in the narrow front seat of the sedan; only a few hands' widths of space separated them, but it felt like a thick wall of ice. Fei Du's eyes flickered slightly. Luo Wenzhou could almost hear barriers lifting in the other man's heart as its owner calmly weighed which security gates to open and how much to reveal in order to get what he wanted.

Only when the GPS told them that they were about to arrive did Luo Wenzhou's question manage to draw a painstakingly measured response from Fei Du's lips.

"You know I always suspected my dad of having something to do with my mom's death," Fei Du began. "Even after you cleared him of suspicion, I could never fully shake that feeling. Logically, intuition connects to the subconscious, and I wanted to know what had given me such a deep-rooted suspicion of him—so I tried to trace it back to things from my childhood. I remembered that my house had a basement that only my dad had the key to. My mother and I were never allowed to get close to it. It was like Bluebeard's locked room. I plotted for half a year before I managed to get the key and passcode and sneak in…"

Alert, Luo Wenzhou caught the slight, difficult pause in his voice.

“…then found an open folder on his desk. Inside was—!” Fei Du was seized by a sudden coughing fit, as if he’d choked on the wind. He turned to the window and, after a long moment, finally managed to clear his throat. “Sorry, I choked,” he said, still somewhat hoarse. “Inside there was a stack of articles, but I was too young—I’d only just started to learn to read. I vaguely remember the articles referring to things like ‘malice’ and ‘psychological trauma.’ The author was someone named Fan Siyuan. When I looked him up, he seemed very mysterious—beyond the fact that he’d taught at Yancheng PSU, there was no trace of him.”

Luo Wenzhou didn’t reply. He instantly knew that Fei Du was bullshitting. Luo Wenzhou himself had seen various documents on his parents’ desks, and apart from the terrible beating he’d received after ripping and folding his father’s meeting notes into paper planes, he remembered nothing—not even a single punctuation mark.

“Why would a businessman have read things like that in his secret study? Don’t you think that’s strange?” Fei Du pulled into the parking lot of Heng’ai Hospital. “After I broke in, though, he destroyed the basement and moved everything that was in it. After all these years, I still haven’t found where he moved the contents of his study. That mysterious stack of academic literature was my last memory of it.”

“I see.” Luo Wenzhou waited for the car to stop fully before unbuckling his seat belt. “If you want to know something in the future, just ask me directly,” he said somewhat coolly. “I like to keep things straightforward. If I can tell you the answer, then I’ll answer immediately. I don’t need you to whore yourself out. As for the things I can’t tell you, I won’t, not even if my brain cells lose half their chromosomes. So you don’t need to sound me out like that next time.”

Fei Du stiffened, his eyebrows raised. “Wait. You think I asked you out because of *that*?”

Luo Wenzhou ignored him and reached out to open the car door, but Fei Du grabbed his shoulder.

“Shixiong,” said Fei Du. He wasn’t angry—in fact, he was grinning. “I’ve been meaning to ask. Are you a little afraid of me?”

Luo Wenzhou’s long brows lifted behind his shades. “Me, afraid of you? What would I be afraid of?”

“That I’m a waste of your feelings, that I have ulterior motives, that you’ll lose yourself and have no way to salvage things…” Fei Du enunciated every word. “Which one?”

Luo Wenzhou’s expression darkened, and he reached up to pull Fei Du’s hand off him. “You’re overthinking—”

“Or are you scared that after I’m done with you, you won’t be able to get out of bed?”

Luo Wenzhou had never seen someone so bold in his life. He had no words of rebuttal—he’d learned his lesson. Mouth shut, he dragged Fei Du out of the car instead.

The pair emerged from the parking lot to find the hospital entrance surrounded by media vans and other vehicles. A gaggle of people were craning their necks, looking all around. Suddenly, someone shouted, “He’s coming!”

The snaps of camera shutters filled the air.

“Get ready! Get ready!”

“Guys, wait until you’re close up before you take the photo.”

“Don’t push!”

Fei Du peered at them. “Bad timing. Zhou Huaixin didn’t tell me that his brother was getting discharged today.”

The most serious of Zhou Huaijin’s medical concerns was really the water he’d choked on in Baisha River. He could’ve been discharged after quickly having his wounds cleaned and dressed, but since he was a rich young master born with a golden spoon in his mouth, his flesh may have been a little more delicate than average. Only now, after three days lying in his private hospital, did he carefully emerge in a wheelchair.

Zhou Huaixin came to pick him up; he was pushing the wheelchair personally and was well prepared for the ruckus at the entrance. As he pushed the wheelchair out, he ordered black-clad bodyguards to force a path; they created a crude human wall to protect Zhou Huaijin. Then Zhou Huaixin took off his unconventional jacket and draped it over his brother to block the view of the cameras behind him.

Zhou Huaijin laughed good-naturedly. “Let them take whatever photos they like.”

Zhou Huaixin was silent for a moment as he pushed the wheelchair out of the hospital. “Don’t you have anything to say to me, Ge?”

Zhou Huaijin was an incomparably elegant man. Even in a wheelchair, with a wan complexion, he was a sight to behold. It was hard to believe he was Zhou Huaixin’s own brother. “Like what?”

Zhou Huaixin looked over his shoulder at the raucous crowd behind him, then lowered his voice. “Ge, no matter what you’ve done…no matter what…you’ll always be my brother.”

“What are you talking about? Who else would I be, if not your brother?” Zhou Huaijin paused, then laughed and reached out to Zhou Huaixin.

Resembling a scrawny, unsightly pup, Zhou Huaixin stared at his hand for a moment. Then he bowed his head, letting Zhou Huaijin pet him gently. His tight shoulders slowly loosened, and an almost serene smile appeared on his ghoulish face.

“Let’s go home,” Zhou Huaijin said warmly.

Zhou Huaixin nodded, docile. He draped the jacket over his brother’s legs, then resumed pushing the wheelchair, carefully maneuvering around rocks in their path.

A pair of eyes watched from afar. *How precious*, their owner thought.

So what if they’d let the uncomprehending masses witness that brief commotion? They were still enormously wealthy, with luxury cars and full-time bodyguards. They were still respectable. Let people snap a few shots today, and tomorrow the news would say, *Fight Over Inheritance Fake News? Look How Brotherly the Zhou Group’s Future Owners Are!*

Nobody would ever know the disgraceful events beneath the shiny exterior. They were all awaiting staged performances by society’s elite—nobody cared about the lives hidden between the lines. Some people lived out their whole lives and were worth no more than a sliver of space in the corner of a news photo, in an article about someone else.

How come?

Suddenly, Zhou Huaixin's phone rang. He stared at it in surprise for a moment, then picked up. "Fei-ye?"

"Look up and ahead."

Zhou Huaixin did as Fei Du asked, glancing around. He spotted Fei Du and Luo Wenzhou in the parking lot across from him.

Fei Du beckoned him. "The police have some questions for you two. Can you get away? Find somewhere for us to meet?"

"Sure. Let's…" Turning around, Zhou Huaixin noticed suddenly that the media people behind them had all aimed their cameras in the opposite direction. Nearby stood a fearful-looking girl in her twenties, a bouquet of flowers in her arms. She didn't approach the brothers, simply bowed to them from far away.

"What's this?" Zhou Huaixin frowned. "Hold on, Fei-ye. I'll call you back."

A bodyguard jogged over and bent to speak in Zhou Huaijin's ear. "Zhou-zong, that's the daughter of the truck driver who hit Zhou-zong Senior's car. She hasn't made any public appearances, but she somehow found out that you were being discharged today and turned up."

"I'm the only one left in my family," the flower-toting girl stuttered. "After what my dad did, I probably can't afford to pay compensation, even if I sell everything I have… I…I just wanted to come in person to see you, to say sorry, even if you may not want my apology…"

Zhou Huaixin looked at Zhou Huaijin.

"Ask her to come over," Zhou Huaijin told him. "She didn't do it, and she looks so pitiful."

Zhou Huaixin was unsurprised; his brother had always projected an image of kindness and courtesy to the public. He turned and spoke to the bodyguards, who let the girl in alone amid a chorus of tuts and complaints.

Across the road, Fei Du narrowed his eyes. "What's with the girl? She looks familiar."

"Isn't that…Dong Xiaoqing?" Luo Wenzhou was taken aback. He pulled his phone out; a moment ago, Tao Ran had texted to notify the sergeant that he was leaving the office. Dong Xiaoqing wanted to hand

something over to the police, and Tao Ran and Xiao Haiyang were going to meet her. “Why is she here? Didn’t she ask—”

A dark premonition sent a chill up Luo Wenzhou’s spine. He had no time to think; he grabbed the parking-lot railing and vaulted straight over it. After a stunned pause, Fei Du hurried after him.

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DONG XIAOQING STOOD BEFORE Zhou Huaijin, her face pale and her whole frame trembling. She bowed humbly to Zhou Huaixin, then to Zhou Huaijin, telling each of them, “Sorry.”

Zhou Huaijin reached out to take her flowers. “I know it was an accident, miss. It’s all right.”

Luo Wenzhou rushed toward the hospital entrance, but bodyguards and media personnel blocked his path. “Police! Move! Let me through!”

Dong Xiaoqing’s eyes seemed to shimmer with tears. Bowing, she shoved her huge bouquet of white lilies into Zhou Huaijin’s lap. “I’m here to—”

“Wait.” Zhou Huaixin reached out to stop her. “My brother’s allergic to po—”

Before the word “pollen” cleared his lips, he spotted a cold gleam behind the flowers. Zhou Huaixin didn’t even consider what it was; moving on instinct, he slammed himself into Zhou Huaijin’s wheelchair, pushing it out of Dong Xiaoqing’s reach. Something cold struck his abdomen; piercing pain followed. Knocked to the ground in his wheelchair, Zhou Huaijin turned in disbelief.

Dong Xiaoqing had stabbed a watermelon knife straight into Zhou Huaixin’s middle. “I’m here to send you to your grave!” she screeched.

Although she was young and girlish, she somehow found the strength to yank the blade free from Zhou Huaixin’s flesh. Her eyes crimson and her appearance deranged, she brandished the bloody knife like a malevolent yaksha in human form, then turned and rushed at the crowd.

The people who'd been congregating at the front broke into shrieks, each louder than the last, as though they were competing. Apart from a few unusually bold heroes in the corners who were taking photos like there was no tomorrow, most had no desire to die for their job. Suddenly everyone was pushing and running in every direction, creating a human fence that blocked the Zhous' confused bodyguards.

Luo Wenzhou's adrenaline spiked so dramatically that it almost burst through his head. He sprinted after Dong Xiaoqing, but when he'd run a few yards, the entire series of events finally hit him. Remembering Fei Du's fear of blood, he quickly turned to check on him.

To Luo Wenzhou's surprise, Fei Du was neither fainting nor vomiting. He simply stood stiffly by Zhou Huaixin's side. Without glasses obscuring his eyes, his expression seemed unfocused, but he was still composed on the whole. His profile was toward Luo Wenzhou, whom he looked at out of the corner of his eye while carefully avoiding the blood all around. Calmly, he lifted a hand and waved.

For a brief instant, Fei Du's hematophobia didn't seem that serious.

Luo Wenzhou had a feeling that something was off, but there was no time to think too deeply about it: Dong Xiaoqing had already run through the crowd, and she was almost beyond the hospital grounds. Guessing the path she would take, Luo Wenzhou ran around the crowd, sticking close to the hospital walls. Then he stepped into a roadside flowerbed and leaped after Dong Xiaoqing like a martial artist in an action flick.

From the moment Dong Xiaoqing stabbed her victim until her escape, everything had moved too fast.

Fei Du's mind filled with buzzing. The blood spurting from Zhou Huaixin's abdomen was a heavy mallet against his chest; fragments of his soul trembled within his frame. Hematophobia was inconvenient. He wasn't likely to see blood in his everyday life, though, and the disgust provoked by the occasional small graze passed in a moment. Fei Du hadn't directly encountered bloodshed like this in a long, long time.

His ears rang. He nearly lost control of his limbs; his fingertips spasmed. Every muscle, bone, and tissue in his body had frozen in a single instant, which kept him upright and apparently alert although his

consciousness was now shaky at best. Fei Du forced his fingers into fists with a chorus of cracking joints. Then he stiffly looked away and walked toward Zhou Huaijin, his heart pounding erratically.

Zhou Huaijin's wheelchair had pinned one of his legs; he knelt on the ground, blank and at a loss. Then Fei Du lifted him by the collar.

"His organs may have been ruptured. Abdominal bleeding is extremely dangerous," Fei Du told Zhou Huaijin, his tone harsh and hurried. "Do you want him to live? If so, call the best emergency doctor at your hospital. I know your legs are fine, Zhou-zong—get up!"

Zhou Huaijin stumbled a little, then stood steady. For two seconds he stared at Fei Du in terror; then he blinked out of his stupor and grabbed his phone.

Zhou Huaixin was struggling like a gutted fish on the ground. No one in the surrounding crowd dared to touch him. Blood poured and poured onto the ground. Fei Du heard Zhou Huaijin stuttering a summons, then watched him fling his phone away to throw himself at Zhou Huaixin and ramble useless things like "it's fine" and "look at Gege." Fei Du wasn't sure what exactly he himself was thinking as he lifted his sweat-soaked eyelashes and met Zhou Huaixin's eyes.

They were losing focus, and the life in them was dimming. In Fei Du's own eyes, Zhou Huaixin was undergoing a bizarre transformation into a heap of organic scrap, something unfamiliar.

Fei Du felt acutely that he was now split into two. One half of him felt the psychosomatic nausea and dizziness provoked by Zhou Huaixin's gushing wound. The other half was from an animal that stood apart from the flock, looking with bemusement into Zhou Huaixin's eyes, unable to reconcile this dying man with the Zhou Huaixin he knew. That half was puzzled by the pain and urgency the others were expressing, but it instinctively attempted to blend in, to find something in itself that matched the psychological experience a normal person might have.

Yet although it plumbed the very depths of itself, there was nothing.

"Humans are afraid of death, but what they truly fear is the unknown. Death itself isn't painful—it can even be pleasurable. You must have experienced this before.

“Have you looked in the eyes of those dying animals? Those are the eyes of beings that have discovered the truth. The truth is that living is an illusion borne of your neurological system—a false sense of self and consciousness.

“Human consciousness is like flowing water, in a constant state of flux. Death is its final direction. Unless you can consciously understand and control that entire process, your life isn’t yours. It’s not in your possession. Every change is your perception diverging from you, and in every moment, you’re dying. The only thing that doesn’t change is that lump of carbon-based matter that makes up your mortal shell. Having feelings about that shell is like thinking of the pork on your plate as human, wouldn’t you say? It’s delusional, darling.”

The heavy smell of blood surged like a tsunami into Fei Du’s nostrils. Even his organs churned. Paramedics, covered in sweat, raced out of Heng’ai Hospital to administer first aid to Zhou Huaixin, then carried him off in a rush. Fei Du followed them to the emergency room. There, he finally gave up and burst into the bathroom, leaving Zhou Huaijin alone.

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MEANWHILE, HAVING COMMITTED murder in front of all those people, Dong Xiaoqing was covered with blood. Her hair tie had broken, and the fashionable loose curls she’d painstakingly ironed into her hair now fanned out behind her. Strands flew up and down in the wind; it occasionally blew them forward, where they fell onto the terrifying weapon in her hand and stuck to it.

“Dong Xiaoqing!” Luo Wenzhou was able to catch up to her thanks to his long legs. Seeing that she was about to run into the main road, he bellowed, “Stop! Do you really think you can get away?”

Presumably exhausted, Dong Xiaoqing suddenly stopped and turned to face Luo Wenzhou. Then she raised her knife at him. He quickly stopped too, a few steps away from her. Luo Wenzhou wasn’t afraid that she’d attack him with her knife—not even ten knife-wielding Dong Xiaoqings

would've been enough of a threat to frighten him—but he didn't understand her motivations at all, and he was worried she might kill herself in her unstable mental state.

"Calm down." Luo Wenzhou flapped his hands downward, trying to meet Dong Xiaoqing's eyes with the calmest, steadiest expression he could muster. He started making things up in an attempt to stabilize her. "It's fine. Listen to me, miss. The man you stabbed isn't dead, so the consequences won't be too serious. Don't worry."

Dong Xiaoqing was still distressed, but she seemed to be recovering some of her wits. The hand wielding the knife kept trembling—either from fear, or out of regret that she hadn't stabbed Zhou Huaixin a second time.

"I'm a police officer," Luo Wenzhou intoned, taking out his badge and showing it to her. "This is my ID. My name is Luo Wenzhou. You can tell me anything."

Dong Xiaoqing took a step back. Her eyes finally focused on Luo Wenzhou—and then her blood-covered face lost its crazed distortion. Her eyes were completely red from the whites to the skin beyond her eyelids, leaking an anguished rage that seemed to come from her very bones. It was as if she were mute, as if the world had never been able to hear her voice—and now that she'd encountered ears bent to her, she didn't know where to start.

Luo Wenzhou carefully ventured forward. "Relax. Isn't that knife heavy? Why not put it down? It's dangerous."

"I…" Dong Xiaoqing deliberately lowered her blade a little. "My dad was…" she said brokenly.

Luo Wenzhou looked at her knife and weighed whether an attempt to grab it might succeed. He inched toward Dong Xiaoqing quietly as he continued to speak. "We know that your father was wronged. We'll clear his name for him."

To his surprise, Dong Xiaoqing burst into tears. "My dad…wasn't wronged."

"What?" Luo Wenzhou froze.

"He was one of them too. They—"

Suddenly, a violent wind gusted past, and a sedan came out of nowhere to accelerate, turn, and slam into Dong Xiaoqing. Luo Wenzhou didn't even have time to react; she went flying past him before the rest of her sentence escaped her lips.

The shattered glass of the windshield came down on Luo Wenzhou like torrential rain, and the driver pumped the accelerator again to rush toward Luo Wenzhou. Finding preternatural strength somewhere within himself, Luo Wenzhou dodged the sedan, though the side mirror did clip him and break off. He ignored the intense pain and protected his head, rolling off the sidewalk.

The killer seemed experienced enough to know that every second they lingered put them at higher risk. They didn't waste time turning to chase him; their attempt on Luo Wenzhou's life had been incidental, and when it failed, they gave up and sped away. The road behind Heng'ai Hospital was pretty empty, especially since it wasn't rush hour, so the deranged driver could drive straight off with that shattered windshield.

The attack left Luo Wenzhou half numb. It took him a long moment to struggle to his feet, but then he ran toward Dong Xiaoqing while simultaneously calling the municipal bureau. "Nanshan Road behind Heng'ai Hospital. White XX sedan, Yancheng license plate, CXXXXX. Put out an alert to the whole city—no, wait, the whole province. The whole *country*! I don't care if he's in the Pacific Ocean—we need to fish him out!"

Dong Xiaoqing's head was now deformed. One shoe had flown across the road. Dirt covered her bare hands and feet, and her body was a bloody mess. She was as dead as a person could get.

"Fucking son of a *bitch*!" Luo Wenzhou couldn't stop the curse from flying from his lips. His brow itched, and when he reached up and wiped it, his hand came away covered in blood—a flying shard of glass had cut his forehead. He took a few ragged breaths. "How are Tao Ran and Xiao Haiyang? Did they reach Dong Xiaoqing's home?"

Lang Qiao had started carrying out his orders without question; this was the first chance she had gotten to speak. "I was about to tell you—Deputy Tao called earlier to say that there was nobody in Dong Xiaoqing's place. But there was a fire… What's going on, Boss? Why do you need that car?"

Luo Wenzhou shut his eyes.

The people Dong Xiaoqing had scared away as she waved her knife were now reassembling. Too wary to approach, they pointed and whispered from both sides of the street.

Dong Xiaoqing lay there in broad daylight.

The girl had had a terrible temper and a stubborn nature. She'd declared both that she was ready to beggar herself to pay back the victim's family and that she would clear her father's name. Why would she take such a desperate risk as to try to kill Zhou Huaijin? Why had she called Xiao Haiyang first? What was she trying to do? What had she wanted to give him?

And her final words: *"He was one of them too."*

Who was "them"?

Who would be so bold as to commit arson and murder right in front of criminal investigators?

For a moment, Luo Wenzhou couldn't breathe.

Chapter 10

IN HENG'AI HOSPITAL, Fei Du finished puking his guts out. He rinsed his mouth; his hands were still shaking. Restless, he undid his top two shirt buttons and splashed his face with cold water, then brushed his wet hair back haphazardly. He stuck two mints in his mouth. Only when the mints had fully dissolved did he find enough strength to stand up and walk back out.

Zhou Huaijin sat doubled over on the hospital bench, nervously wringing his bloody hands. A green vein twitched visibly in his neck. Suddenly, a wet towel fell on him; Zhou Huaijin looked up to see that Fei Du had walked over. Instead of looking back at Zhou Huaijin, though, Fei Du lifted his face to the light outside the operating room.

"Here. Wipe your hands," said Fei Du. "I suppose you don't know me well, Zhou-zong. Huaixin hung out with me sometimes."

Zhou Huaijin gathered himself to answer. "I know, Mr. Fei. Your reputation precedes you."

"Likewise," Fei Du said, his voice lukewarm. "Zhou Huaixin brought you up in every other conversation. He was so attached to you, it was like he was still being weaned. He mentioned you so often that my ears blistered."

Zhou Huaijin took a deep breath. His hands tightened around each other.

A few paramedics rushed past them then, startling Zhou Huaijin. He rose, looking in the direction of the operating room for a moment, then gave up on sitting altogether and began to pace. The gentle mask he usually wore was nowhere to be found. His hair was a mess, and he clasped his hands tightly as if praying in hopes that some unknown god would take pity on him. "He's fine, he's fine… He'll be fine," he murmured, reassuring himself.

"Since that long a blade went in and out, the chances that he'll be fine are very slim," Fei Du cut in heartlessly. "They say one's death is up to fate,

Zhou-zong, but he did that for you."

Zhou Huaijin's shoulders slumped helplessly. "I know. I just—"

"I'm not talking about blocking the knife," Fei Du said, his tone forceful. "You know what I mean, Zhou-zong. I mean the whole thing, beginning to end. I wonder—do you believe that lying to the world always has consequences? Sometimes a person makes things up, and bad luck follows them and makes those things real."

Zhou Huaijin shuddered.

Fei Du spread his hands. "Why don't you talk about it—starting with your plot to kidnap yourself?"

Black-clad bodyguards closed in around them, nervously surrounding Fei Du. Fei Du's pale lips twisted into a scornful smirk, but otherwise, he ignored them entirely. If they'd been any good, Zhou Huaixin wouldn't be fighting for his life on the operating table.

After a long pause, Zhou Huaijin waved the bodyguards away. "Go, all of you. Let me speak to Mr. Fei." He was silent for a moment. "You're right."

Fei Du walked to the vending machine and bought two bottles of water. He handed one to Zhou Huaijin.

"I hired them," Zhou Huaijin said after a few large gulps of water. "Hengda included. I chose them too."

"Weren't you afraid that the police would be too slow, and you'd drown in the river?"

"People were watching me, ready to save me if anything went wrong. We enlisted locals who knew the place and wouldn't be easily caught by the police. Even if they had been caught, I would just have sworn that they were simply kind passersby."

"Victim" was certainly a convenient role.

Fei Du nodded. "You're often out of the country, so you might not know the region very well. Did Hu Zhenyu hire those two kidnappers? And why use Baisha?"

“I was the planner and decision-maker. Everyone else just did as I asked. So there’s no need for you to involve anyone else.” Zhou Huaijin paused. “Baisha was easy to reach from the airport and the person I’d asked to help me was from there, but we had no connection to it ourselves. So nobody would find that location suspicious.”

“Who was helping you?”

“Just a friend I did a minor favor for once.” Zhou Huaijin shook his head. “They aren’t related to this whole thing. Don’t ask—I won’t sell them out.”

Fei Du had expected this. Folding his arms, he leaned back against the white hospital wall, waiting for Zhou Huaijin to continue.

“I…I saw the opportunity when I got the news that he was dead,” Zhou Huaijin said hoarsely. “I’m just a shiny mascot for the Zhou Group. Zhou Junmao controlled everything, but even if he died, there was his number one lackey, Zheng Kaifeng—so the company would never have come to me.”

“I thought you were a better candidate than Yang Bo. Both because of who you are, and because of your experience,” said Fei Du.

“‘Who I am’? What am I? Nothing but a fig leaf.” Zhou Huaijin laughed bitterly. “My mother was pregnant with me when she married Zhou Junmao. I was her previous husband’s son. Of course, they claimed that I was just premature. Everyone else thought Zhou Junmao was competent, driven, charitable, patriotic—the personification of virtue. But surely you didn’t, Mr. Fei?”

Fei Du lifted his gaze.

“I heard that the elder Mr. Fei lived alone after he was widowed.” Zhou Huaijin spread his hands self-deprecatingly. “So you’d find it hard to understand a mess like this, wouldn’t you?”

“You mean…you’ve done a paternity test?” Fei Du asked quietly.

Zhou Huaijin shrugged. “What would be the point? I’ve known since I was a child that I’m not his biological son. Zhou Junmao wouldn’t have been unaware of that—he’d have done a DNA test privately. Huaixin was his only true son, and even Huaixin he didn’t care about much, let alone me.

Not to be funny, but the fact that he never poisoned me to death is already the result of many battles."

Fei Du squeezed his ice-cold bottle of mineral water. He glanced ponderingly at Zhou Huaijin. Though the other man looked young, his ID said he was thirty-eight. Maybe Zhou Huaijin didn't realize that the technology for paternity tests hadn't been available thirty-eight years ago.

"You're implying that Zhou Junmao would have used…" Fei Du weighed his words for a moment, then said cautiously, "underhanded methods?"

"How else do you think my birth father died? From a heart attack?" Zhou Huaijin asked coldly. "Zhou Junmao's right-hand man started out as a gangster. Birds of a feather flock together. There's no low they wouldn't stoop to."

"How do you know that?"

"My mother told me before she died. When she was young, she thought my father was too controlling, and he had some…proclivities she found difficult to accept. But she didn't want to get a divorce. Zhou Junmao seduced her into cheating on him. Then the scumbags Zhou and Zheng persuaded her to conspire with them. Did she really think two adulterers would have a happily ever after?" The jade-smooth Zhou Huaijin was exposing sharp edges he'd kept hidden for decades. "Hilarious. Before long, she realized this new man was even worse than the last scumbag, and then unfortunately she had me. But Zhou Junmao assumed that she had evidence that they'd killed Zhou Yahou. That—and my mother's shares in the group—were the only reasons he held his nose and pretended that I didn't exist."

Clouds of confusion thickened over Fei Du's head. "'Assumed'?"

"My mother had a safe deposit box in a private bank. No one could open it apart from her and whoever she left it to. She used the key to that box to keep Zhou Junmao under control. Then it came into my hands." Zhou Huaijin sighed. "Now Zhou Junmao is dead, so I can be honest: The only thing in there is a box of expired heart medication. It really wasn't what Zhou Junmao thought. If it were, I would've exposed and destroyed him long ago. Why would I still be playing nice like this, all pathetic and sad?"

“You say you’re Zhou Yahou’s son,” Fei Du said slowly, sorting out his thoughts. “Who else knows about this?”

“Zhou Dalong was noble and righteous on the surface, but what that meant was that he lived like a lone wolf. How could he possibly have let anyone see that he’d been hoodwinked? I think everyone other than Zheng Kaifeng was fooled. Except Huaixin…” Zhou Huaijin looked up at the operating-room light again. He bit his tongue for a moment, then continued with difficulty. “Huaixin was always more sensitive than the other kids. I think he guessed it, but he never asked about it. That boy…that boy grew up under my care. My mother spent the rest of her life tortured by the crime she’d committed, and she was pretty old when she gave birth to Huaixin; postpartum depression exacerbated her mental health issues, so she really couldn’t look after him. Apart from my foolish murderer of a mother, Huaixin was my only blood relative in the Zhou family. He was so little and so innocent. Even if that man’s blood flowed in his veins… He was all I had, and I was all he had.”

Having grown up in such a twisted home, the brothers had good reason to hate each other, but they’d been forced to depend on each other for a very long time.

Zhou Huaijin laced his fingers together and supported his forehead on his hands. “If this was retribution, why take *him*?”

Fei Du knew that the socially appropriate thing to do would be to pat Zhou Huaijin’s shoulder to console him. But his heart was full of tired indifference; like a cold-blooded animal with a slow metabolism, he couldn’t be bothered to lift his hand. He cocked his head and examined Zhou Huaijin, then continued placidly, “You said that Huaixin was the old man’s only son. So you know that Yang Bo and Zhou Junmao aren’t related?”

“You already tested Yang Bo and Zhou Junmao’s DNA? The Chinese police sure act quickly.” Zhou Huaijin blinked hard, trying to calm himself. “Yang Bo is…a very superficial man. He has a lot of ambition but very little talent to go with it. He follows Zheng Kaifeng around all day, calling himself Zheng Kaifeng’s student, but he’s only learned the most superficial things. Why would a man like that—neither wellborn nor well educated, with neither the qualifications nor ability—be promoted to his position at

such a young age? Naturally, people were speculating, which is where the rumor started. And despite how widespread it was, neither Zhou Junmao nor Zheng Kaifeng, Yang Bo's backer, ever came out to correct it. Maybe the kid really started believing he was some Prince Returning Pearl after a while."[9] Zhou Huaijin squeezed the bottle of mineral water, shaking his head. "He secretly collected Zhou Junmao's DNA along with some of his own, then found an illegal paternity-test clinic… He even did that part in secret. Some people really are fundamentally incapable of doing things honestly and transparently."

"Then you found out what he was doing."

"I knew the person in charge of the illegitimate clinic. We'd played golf together. He's a white guy, a con man, typical trash. He knows lots of secrets. He comes off as someone who doesn't talk, but he's actually done tons of deals—you just have to pay his price."

"And he told you—"

"Actually, he gave me the information as a free bonus," said Zhou Huaijin. "I paid him for a separate service: replacing Yang Bo's DNA with Huaixin's."

Yang Bo, a poor kid with nothing, must have felt both pride and gratitude over his boss's sudden recognition of him—perhaps even reverence. He must have followed conscientiously behind the man who was his patron, doing his utmost every day to seem less ordinary. Maybe he even thought of the old man, who was shrouded in legend and mystery, as an idol to look up to.

But what if, one day, he'd realized that his treatment was all because he was the legal successor to his idol's fortune? He would probably have been shocked, and then utterly bitter, since that would imply that his mother had betrayed his father and their family and that his idol had betrayed his trust.

Then again, human nature was sometimes base and weak. His bitter hatred wouldn't be solid enough to last long; very quickly, his thoughts would turn to stranger horizons, like how he should've been born with a golden spoon in his mouth, the equal of all the strapping young men whose positions in life depended on their fathers. What right had Zhou Huaijin,

Zhou Huaixin, and their hoity-toity friends to look down on him? Why did Zhou Junmao refuse to acknowledge him? He was Zhou Junmao's son and Zheng-lao's own protégé. Everyone knew that Zheng-lao had a tense relationship with the older Zhou son anyway. If Yang Bo had the same father, why did he only deserve a salaried job, rather than his own share of the family business?

Why couldn't the Zhou Group be his?

"So you faked the paternity test results," Fei Du murmured. "'He shall spurn fate, scorn death, and bear his hopes 'bove wisdom, grace, and fear.'"

Zhou Huaijin shut his eyes, his lips barely moving as he completed the phrase inaudibly. "'And you all know, security is mortals' chiefest enemy.'"

"'How now, Hecate?'"[10] Fei Du looked at him in derision. "So, after your superhuman efforts to make Yang Bo believe himself the Zhou family's bastard son and to give him infinite hope—what did you hope to achieve?"

"Yang Bo is Zheng Kaifeng's man," Zhou Huaijin replied. "I don't know why Zheng Kaifeng values him so highly, but the old geezer really does think of the boy as his trusted confidant. Back when he promoted Yang Bo, it was against everyone's objections. Even Zhou Dalong had misgivings, although he did agree to it eventually. It's a game; I'm in a weaker position, so I need to strategize and destroy my opponents' alliances. I need to make Yang Bo want more than he has and use him to drive a wedge between Zhou Junmao and Zheng Kaifeng. I want them all to pay the price."

Fei Du looked at him expressionlessly.

"At this point, I have no reason to lie to you." Zhou Huaijin pinched the bridge of his nose hard. "Mr. Fei, even if I used questionable methods, I didn't commit any serious crimes to exact my revenge. You may admonish me for immorality, but you must admit I did not do this without reason."

"Zhou-zong," Fei Du drawled, "I'm not the one who will determine whether you're censured or what price you'll pay. First of all, the law will need to assess how badly your huge farce wasted police resources.

Secondly, how you're penalized will depend on the findings regarding the Zhou Junmao crash."

"I didn't expect Zhou Junmao to get into a fatal accident," said Zhou Huaijin. "As I'd scripted things, the clinic would tell Yang Bo the results of the test, and I'd be sent a copy 'unintentionally,' then race to Yang Bo to demand answers. I'd piss him off and then end with an angry 'Dad will never acknowledge you as his son.' I know Yang Bo—he's not very grounded. He'd be so angry that he'd lose control and start speaking without thinking. With enough luck, I could even get a few useful recordings from him. And Yang Bo might be so mad that he'd want to slap me in the face by 'reuniting with his ancestry.' If so, I had a plan for that. But you may have noticed by now that Zhou Junmao died at an inconvenient time for me; my plan was strangled in the cradle."

"When you got wind of Zhou Junmao's death, you realized immediately that—even though it disrupted your plans—it was an opportunity. You hinted to Zhou Huaixin to make a police report and draw the attention of the police and the public, then used Yang Bo as a shield, taking advantage of the momentum of the suspicion around the crash to create your farce. That made Zhou Junmao's death even more mysterious, and it meant you could frame Yang Bo; then you'd use the issue of the charity funds to prompt the police to investigate Zheng Kaifeng. Attacking both your enemies and destroying Zhou Junmao's reputation while the Zhou Group's stocks fluctuate—"

Zhou Huaijin gulped. He didn't try to explain himself; that alone was a tacit admission.

"Weren't you afraid that Zhou Group shares would never rise again? That the company would be a wreck by the time it fell into your hands?"

"The current Zhou Group was named after Zhou Junmao," Zhou Huaijin whispered. "It's linked to his reputation, his blood, his life—it's part of him. I wanted to destroy his golden image. As for the rest of it…it's all just material things, you know? Mr. Fei, if you grew up with a thorn in your heart, would the threat of losing material wealth make you afraid to pull it out? There are times when money and material things really lose their attraction for people like us."

When Fei Du heard the words “thorn in your heart,” his fingers tightened involuntarily, almost denting his water bottle. But then, suddenly, paramedics sprinted past them with packs of blood, heading straight for the operating room. Their footsteps seemed to tap out an ominous beat.

Zhou Huaijin shot to his feet. “Doctors, my brother—”

The Zhous were a major funder of Heng’ai; the staff wouldn’t dare brush one of them off. Someone who looked like a nurse said carefully, “Don’t worry, sir. We’ll do our best to save him.”

Hearing the implication, Zhou Huaijin stumbled.

Fei Du reached out to support his elbow. “Is Huaixin a ‘material thing’ too, Mr. Zhou?” Zhou Huaijin’s face changed, like that of an animal whose tail had been stepped on, but Fei Du was relentless. “While you and your henchman Hu Zhenyu were playing your game, your brother noticed. But he didn’t say a word; he even played along. Do you know what he said to Hu Zhenyu?”

“I—”

“He said he didn’t understand all these things. He just wanted you to be safe.” Fei Du spoke quickly, his voice hard and sharp as a blade piercing Zhou Huaijin’s ear. “I tried to trick him into talking afterward, and he pretended that he was the one who’d set up the kidnapping. He tried to take the fall for you. I have a question for you, Mr. Zhou. You told me everything about your Tragedy of Hamlet, but why didn’t you mention the woman who attacked you? You seem to know why she was so hysterical. Can you tell me—”

The operating room door opened from the inside, cutting Fei Du off.

The ever-ticking clock on the wall seemed to stop. Zhou Huaijin stared fearfully at the doctor who walked out. At the same time, Fei Du’s phone vibrated in his pocket. He pulled it out and checked it.

Luo Wenzhou had sent him a simple text: *Dong Xiaoqing is dead*.

Fei Du froze and instantly let go of Zhou Huaijin. His first instinct was to call Luo Wenzhou back immediately. “Are you okay?”

It was noisy where Luo Wenzhou was. Before Luo Wenzhou could reply, Zhou Huaijin fell to his knees in front of Fei Du, who heard the

doctor say, “I’m so sorry, Mr. Zhou. We did our best.”

Chapter 11

A LINE OF SCREAMING POLICE CARS surrounded the site where Dong Xiaoqing had been struck. The camera at the intersection had captured the entire hit-and-run with crisp clarity.

"That's it—that's the car." Luo Wenzhou's swollen arm burned with pain from being scraped by the car mirror, but his bones were fine, so the injury posed no obstacle to his jumping around, commanding everyone at the scene. "That asshole had his face covered, and he was completely suited up—not a single hair poking out. This definitely wasn't his first rodeo. Turning and hitting someone at that speed? Anyone less skilled would have flipped the car. He clearly also had his escape route planned out ahead of time."

"Sergeant Luo, are you okay?" A colleague reviewing security footage gave him a frightened look. "Should we get a doctor to take a look at you for now?"

"Don't worry. I won't die." The fury in Luo Wenzhou blazed so hot it could've burned a hole in the ground. He reined in his temper, afraid that if his anger grew any further it might knock the Earth out of orbit. As calmly as he could, he said, "I need everyone to reinvestigate all of Dong Xiaoqing and Dong Qian's relationships—*all* of them—especially Dong Qian's. The team he worked on, his clients, even small details like what rest stops he went to and where he made purchases or ate—"

"Maybe you should at least wrap that up first, Sergeant Luo. You're bleeding."

At this second interruption, Luo Wenzhou finally lost his patience. "There's a perp committing murder in broad daylight on the road, and we don't know where he is. So why the fuck are you all staring at *me*?"

Everyone fell silent. The doctor who'd been called over to help was afraid even to breathe too loudly.

Luo Wenzhou wiped the graze on his forearm against his shirt irritably, then realized that he'd lost control of himself. He took a few deep

breaths and quickly pushed down his helpless anger and frustration. “Sorry. That wasn’t aimed at you guys.” He lowered his head slightly, trying to sound calmer. “This murderer killed someone in front of me and managed to get away. That’s my fault, and I’m frustrated. Sorry to make you all suffer along with me.”

A colleague familiar with his temper said understandingly, “Boss, it’s a miracle you’re all right. Who could’ve stopped that? You’re not a Transformer.”

Luo Wenzhou squeezed out a smile. “Given that the culprit covered his face, I doubt he was careless enough to leave any useful clues on the car. I think—”

Before he finished speaking, a colleague tasked with investigating the car suddenly had an update. “Sergeant Luo, we found the car owner. She’s a regular white-collar worker who happened to have a career-qualification exam today. She said the parking lot closest to her exam center was full, and she was nearly late, so she just parked illegally in an empty space close by. She found an out-of-the-way spot with no cameras because she didn’t want to get ticketed. She’s still got one more exam, so she didn’t even know that her car had been stolen until we contacted her just now.”

Luo Wenzhou let out a long breath. He’d managed to jinx the situation again.

“Sergeant Luo, the car’s been caught on a traffic camera!”

“Let’s go!” he said gruffly.

But they were still too late. Half an hour after, the police found the wrecked car in the courtyard of an abandoned warehouse. The windshield of the once well-maintained white vehicle was now completely shattered, and only one side mirror was left, so the car resembled One-Ear from *Black Cat Detective*. All four doors were open, and the car was empty. Its shattered headlights and crooked bumper created a blood-speckled caricature of a smile.

The forensic technicians who’d accompanied them discussed the situation in low voices.

“What terrible damage. Can it be repaired?”

“Fixed? Who cares? Who’d want to drive a car that killed someone?”

“This car isn’t cheap, though. Just a basic model would cost thirty or forty thousand yuan. Is the owner rich?”

“Probably not. People who work hard to obtain qualifications are usually just other people’s employees.”

“If I owned this car, I’d probably lose my mind. This disaster came out of nowhere!”

These technical personnel had been transferred directly over from the municipal bureau, so they hadn’t been to the crime scene, nor seen the corpse directly. Their first thoughts weren’t of that hair-raising murder. Instead, the wrecked “murder weapon” triggered the ever-present unease of salaried workers. Every day, they followed the law, worked hard, and saved up as much as they could. In ten years, they might have put aside enough for a place they’d only ever sleep in; in five years, they might save enough for a car that’d forever be stuck in traffic. But they’d end up with a buttload of debt. If they were late for work even once and couldn’t receive their full pay, they’d fear that they were in big trouble.

And someone could just ruin those things—casually take away several years of hard work and saving up. In that case, there would be nowhere to seek justice, because comparatively, it wasn’t a big deal. After all, you would only have lost a car. Next to the girl who’d been struck and crushed to death, you would be lucky.

Locks on doors only stopped righteous people, not evil ones. Laws and regulations likewise seemed only to bind and shackle good, law-abiding citizens. Being “honest,” “well-behaved,” “civilized,” or “reasonable” seemed to be a mistake. Toeing the line was nowhere near as freeing as being a mad dog that bit whomever it pleased.

When Luo Wenzhou passed them, his dark mood made the technicians snap their mouths shut. He circled the area, knowing that the culprit was confident and had probably dumped the car here after a lot of thought. They’d carefully calculated how to flee without a trace, and by now, they’d probably disappeared into the sea of people living in this city.

Luo Wenzhou sat alone in a police car outside the area and lit a cigarette, squinting from the smoke and the faint smell of blood. Taking

stock of things, he got a bottle of water from the car and rinsed his cuts and scrapes. Then he tried to call all the involved parties to give them each a concise report. When it came to Fei Du, Luo Wenzhou hesitated. Fei Du was probably at the hospital, trying to get information out of Zhou Huaijin while he was at his most vulnerable, so Luo Wenzhou just sent him a text.

But before he even put his phone away, Fei Du was calling *him*. After Fei Du had voiced his unprompted concern, Luo Wenzhou slowly exhaled a smoke ring. “Why wouldn’t I be okay?”

Fei Du fell silent for a while. Luo Wenzhou could hear his long, quiet breaths through the phone. They lingered in his ear, calming him for some reason. However, less than two seconds later, chaos erupted in the background on Fei Du’s end. Someone shouted something, which was followed by frantic footsteps and more yelling.

Zhou Huaixin was dead.

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THE ZHOU FAMILY were major patrons of Heng’ai Hospital. Everyone surged in loudly to hold Zhou Huaijin up. Soon, even the hospital director and various department heads arrived. The murmurs of “my condolences” were like the sound of frogs after rain—the many croaks all sounded the same, as if spoken with one voice.

As he held the phone on his call to Luo Wenzhou, Fei Du thought with clarity, *He’s gone*.

As soon as the thought popped up, his heart lurched, as if he’d driven over a small rock.

“I thought that for someone with your capabilities, it would be a cinch to catch Dong Xiaoqing.” Fei Du stared at the dark black hole of the operating room door, then moved to find a corner away from the raucousness of the crowd. There, he continued evenly, “You’ve been involved in many hostage situations. There’s no way you couldn’t control one girl with a knife. Even if she’d been intent on killing herself after

committing murder, you could've stopped her as long as she hesitated for a single moment. So why did she die? Did something happen?"

Fei Du's pitchless voice was like a bowl of warm water slowly trickling through the phone into Luo Wenzhou's ear. For some reason, all the sergeant's anger dissipated when he heard those words. He put out the cigarette and rested his forehead against his thumb. For whatever reason, he really wanted to see Fei Du right then. "It's a long story. Our colleagues are already at Heng'ai Hospital. What's happening with Zhou Huaijin? Did he confess anything?"

"Yes. He planned the kidnapping himself."

"All right. Tell my colleagues to grab him and bring him back to the bureau." Luo Wenzhou paused. "Wait for me at the hospital."

Seemingly oblivious to the way Luo Wenzhou's tone turned gentler with that last sentence, Fei Du hung up. He walked over to Zhou Huaijin.

Zhou Huaijin's face bore no tear tracks, nor much of an expression at all. He just kept staring in disbelief toward the operating room. Then the body was pushed out draped in a white cloth. With a burst of energy, Zhou Huaijin broke free from the people trying to pull him back and threw himself recklessly forward. He reached to pull away the white cloth, insistent on seeing the truth for himself.

Zhou Huaixin lay there quietly, his face deathly pale, almost gray. He looked nothing like he had when he was alive. It reminded Fei Du of a painting he'd purchased from Zhou Huaixin, of a crowded city intersection. Numerous skyscrapers and billboards were rendered in careless smears of shades of gray, and skeletons walked the street wearing bright, colorful clothes in various styles—which marked some of them as men and some as women, some old and some young.

Zhou Huaixin's artistic skills were mediocre, and he always chose subjects that would induce any visitors who happened upon a piece in a living room to suspect that their host had some sort of mental illness. Plenty of the people who bought his paintings did so only to pander to the Zhou family. The purchased paintings would be stored at the bottom of a box and collect dust. Whenever Fei Du or a friend of his acquired one of Zhou Huaixin's paintings, they always had to tease the artist: "Old Master Zhou,

when are you going to die? After you do, these paintings will be worth a lot more!”

Now all those paintings stuck waiting under beds, in basements, and in storage rooms had their lucky break. There was hope that they’d see the light of day again.

“Zhou-zong, stop looking! Zhou-zong!”

Everyone hurried to pull Zhou Huaijin away. His lips trembled as though he hadn’t quite processed what had happened.

Fei Du studied him. “Zhou-zong,” he called out gently.

Zhou Huaijin looked at him weakly. “I’m…sorry. Right now…my brain’s a mess…”

Just then, the police walked in. Clearly, they’d received Luo Wenzhou’s instructions, and they were about to lead Zhou Huaijin away. Fei Du gestured to them behind his back, signaling them to wait, and continued to address Zhou Huaijin. “The police have protocols to follow. I’m afraid you’ll have to go with them soon. But if you trust me, Zhou-zong, I can stay here for a bit and look after Huaixin for you.”

Zhou Huaijin’s gaze swept across the police who surrounded them. He seemed to want to look back at Zhou Huaixin, but for some reason, his gaze never landed on his dead brother—perhaps he was afraid. After his initial shock, he instinctively tried to maintain his dignity in front of all these strangers. He shrugged off a bodyguard’s support and stood straight, then nodded at Fei Du. “Sorry for the trouble.”

Fei Du bowed silently. His next words stabbed Zhou Huaijin right in the heart. “Huaixin protected you with his life. He must’ve wanted you to live well. Take care, Zhou-zong.”

Zhou Huaijin stumbled.

“Oh—right.” Fei Du glanced at his back. “I forgot something important just now: When we DNA-tested for Yang Bo and Mr. Zhou Senior, we also collected samples from you and Huaixin. I don’t know what kind of complicated relationships your family has, Zhou-zong, but the DNA test results are straightforward enough.”

Zhou Huaijin's pupils constricted. Seeming to detect something in Fei Du's pause, he turned around slowly.

Fei Du shook his head and put on a show of being regretful, covering up the inconspicuous smile at the corner of his mouth. "It's really curious. The DNA test results showed that you're Zhou Junmao's son."

For a second, Zhou Huaijin felt like he didn't understand Chinese. He stared at Fei Du, lost. Then, with great difficulty, his overloaded nerves finally processed Fei Du's words. He swayed in place. "Wh…what'd you say?" he asked, stumbling over his words. "Say…say that again…"

If you stared into a person's eyes as their world collapsed, you'd see something spectacular. It was like an avalanche on a tall mountain, a tornado sweeping through a village, a story-high wave rushing toward land, or a falling rockslide. Fei Du clearly felt the unparalleled rush produced by the sight—a state that all sadists and murderers had chased since the beginning of time.

When the police saw Zhou Huaijin throw himself at Fei Du, they thought he was trying to kill him. They rushed forward and subdued him. "No! No!" Zhou Huaijin, who had always radiated elegance before others, screamed brokenly. "Say that again! There's no way!"

A police officer steadied Fei Du. "Are you all right?"

"Don't worry." Fei Du adjusted his collar, then said expressionlessly, "Be careful with him. Give him a sedative if you have to. Don't worry—when he wakes up, he'll spill everything. Thanks for your hard work. You guys can head back first; I'll wait here for Sergeant Luo."

Hearing that, the officer nodded and rushed to catch up with his colleagues. After a dozen steps or so, however, he turned back to glance at Fei Du, his hair standing on end for some reason.

Fei Du remained at the hospital, dealing methodically with Zhou Huaixin's body. He sent away the media, notified the police's forensic pathologists, and escaped Heng'ai Hospital's director, who desperately wanted to know what was going on. After all that was done, Fei Du waited at the hospital entrance until Luo Wenzhou arrived.

Afraid that Fei Du would balk at the sight of his blood, Luo Wenzhou had taken care of his more obvious injuries on his way over. He was

prepared to drag a dehydrated Fei Du back into the hospital, but Fei Du was completely fine—his normally pale face had even gained a little color. They quickly got each other up to speed. But Luo Wenzhou hesitated, hiding what Dong Xiaoqing had said to him, and while Fei Du repeated Zhou Huaijin's statements straightforwardly, he omitted how he'd maneuvered Zhou Huaijin into a breakdown.

Taking in the unbelievable drama of the rich, Luo Wenzhou gave Fei Du a side glance. "Your fear of blood is just an act, isn't it?" he couldn't resist asking.

Fei Du just smiled. "You probably aren't in the mood for a date with me today, Shixiong. Can I trouble you to drive me home? You've been to the house before."

Fei Du normally stayed in the city. He lived close to his company in a condo perfectly sized for a single man. Luo Wenzhou froze for a moment before realizing that Fei Du meant the house where his mother had passed away. "What are you doing there?"

"Business," Fei Du said simply.

Luo Wenzhou's brow furrowed. Fei Du was acting a bit abnormal. He'd called Luo Wenzhou the moment he learned about Dong Xiaoqing's death, but seeing Luo Wenzhou now, all bruised and battered, he hadn't even asked about it. He usually had so much to say, but now he just leaned back silently in the passenger seat, his eyes closed.

Fei Du's house wasn't far from Heng'ai Hospital. Without traffic to slow them down, they arrived in twenty minutes. Luo Wenzhou parked his police car in front of that eerie yet gorgeous mansion and nudged Fei Du. "We're here."

Fei Du opened his eyes, his gaze cold and lifeless. Without even thanking Luo Wenzhou, he pushed the door open and moved to get out.

Luo Wenzhou finally couldn't help but reach out and seize Fei Du's wrist. "Wait. What's going on with you?"

Fei Du tried to break free but naturally failed. He sighed as though exhausted. "Let go," he all but whispered.

Of course, Luo Wenzhou couldn’t bring himself to do that; the more of Fei Du’s behavior he saw, the more he thought something was off. “You __”

That first syllable had barely left his lips when he was violently pushed into the driver’s seat. His back twinged sharply, making him freeze as a pair of cold lips fell on his and took his breath away.

In all of Luo Wenzhou’s years as a criminal investigation officer, he’d never been attacked quite like this. He was completely unprepared; his brain short-circuited, and he reached out instinctively to give a shove to… nothing.

Seemingly anticipating Luo Wenzhou’s response, Fei Du had retreated almost immediately upon making contact. His eyes were subtly bloodshot, and their corners curved ever so slightly as a smile brewed within them.

Not a warm, gentle smile, but one that was a bit wicked.

Only then did Luo Wenzhou taste the trace of mint Fei Du had left behind—not sweet, but a little cool. Its iciness slipped past his lips and sliced its way to his throat, infecting him down to his chest, where it rode roughshod over his pounding heart.

Fei Du had a perfect grasp of push and pull. He didn’t linger, persistent and relentless; he remained at a suggestive distance. That left Luo Wenzhou room to reject him, but also to relive the interaction and yearn. As Fei Du’s eyes traced Luo Wenzhou’s face, they seemed to hold something significant, and Fei Du was sharp enough to detect the pause in Luo Wenzhou’s breath. This seemed like the perfect moment for another attack.

An instant later, Fei Du bore down again. Luo Wenzhou tried to ward him off with one hand, and Fei Du pushed it against the car seat. He looked down his straight nose like a leopard on the hunt surveying its territory, then rubbed elegantly and languidly against Luo Wenzhou’s cheek and coaxed open Officer Luo’s not-too-unyielding lips.

It was as though someone had stuck a heating element into the narrow confines of the car. The still air warmed rapidly as Fei Du’s scent engulfed Luo Wenzhou.

Luo Wenzhou wasn’t some virtuous gentleman who could refuse any temptation, and the day’s ups and downs had worn his willpower dangerously low for an encounter with someone who ranked as highly in the art of kissing as Fei Du, who possessed a level of skill Luo Wenzhou hadn’t come across in many years. His logical mind fell silent, and his restless flesh took a hint from the slight tenderness that his heart had possessed to begin with. It accepted Fei Du’s invitation automatically, leading Luo Wenzhou to lift his hand and press it against the back of Fei Du’s neck, firmly pulling him into Luo Wenzhou’s embrace.

At that point, the feeling of Fei Du’s always-cold body summoned Luo Wenzhou’s consciousness back into his head to give breath to reason and scream in his ear, *What the fuck do you think you’re doing?!*

A vein twitched in the hand on the back of Fei Du’s neck. Only through the strength of a revolutionary spirit that could’ve withstood such tortures as chili water and the tiger chair did he manage to seize Fei Du and pull him off.

Fei Du fell sideways against the passenger seat and raised an eyebrow regretfully. Then, apparently unperturbed, he opened the car door. Even as Luo Wenzhou’s burning gaze threatened to grill him into a human barbecue skewer, he raised a thumb to wipe the corner of his lips. “Now that I’ve paid the fare, may I leave, Shixiong?”

Luo Wenzhou glared coldly at him. “Get lost. Go.”

That response seemed to please Fei Du. The bastard got out calmly, then bent down and waved through the window. “Drive carefully. By the way, that bruise on your waist is awful. Do you need to get it checked at the hospital? I couldn’t even bear to touch it.”

Only the breeze from the lowered car window allowed Luo Wenzhou to realize that that scoundrel had lifted the hem of his shirt.

“Those abs really are great to touch, though,” Fei Du added. Then he stuffed his hands in his pockets, turned, and sauntered toward the empty house.

Luo Wenzhou felt two flames flaring in his heart in turn, billowing smoke from every opening, unquenchable and threatening to explode.

As he watched Fei Du's back in the rearview mirror, the traces of tenderness in his heart disappeared again. He didn't know whether he wanted to rip off Fei Du's clothes or his actual skin.

As Luo Wenzhou watched, he suddenly realized that Fei Du's ramrod-straight sleeves were swaying without any wind. At first, he thought there was some reflective pattern sewn into the sleeve. Upon closer inspection, though, Fei Du was actually trembling, as though he was frozen or had been shocked with electricity.

Luo Wenzhou furrowed his brow. Worried, he opened his door and followed behind Fei Du.

Perhaps out of confidence in this rich neighborhood's excellent security, Fei Du didn't even close the gate. He just left it wide open. The property's grounds were covered with ice-cold marble; maybe, because no one had lived there in a long time, the hassle of maintaining the grass had seemed daunting.

By the time Luo Wenzhou reached him, Fei Du had taken out the key to unlock the door.

"Hey," Luo Wenzhou said. "You—"

Just then, he saw Fei Du stumble. Only a moment ago, the man had been happy to take advantage of him, but now he was pressing a hand against the door handle for support. The handle gave way, and the door opened; surprised, Fei Du staggered and fell to his knees with a dull thud on the entryway's cold marble floor.

Luo Wenzhou's own legs nearly gave out at the sound. He rushed over and grabbed Fei Du, whose cheeks were no longer unnaturally flushed; he was now even paler than normal. Cold sweat beaded his forehead, and his hands and feet wouldn't stop trembling.

"What's wrong?" Luo Wenzhou pulled Fei Du into his arms and cupped his face. "What's wrong? Fei Du, say something!"

"Low…low blood sugar…" Fei Du mumbled nearly inaudibly. He reached out for Luo Wenzhou's knee, wanting to get up, but his arms were jelly. After struggling for a moment, he fell back.

“‘Low blood sugar’?” Luo Wenzhou mocked this ridiculous excuse immediately. “So have you taken advantage of me so many times that you’ve run out of steam, old man? I’m truly speechless.”

He slid both arms under Fei Du’s body and picked him up off the ground.

Fei Du was tall when he stood; anywhere you put him, he had a strong, imposing presence. Now that Luo Wenzhou was carrying him, though, he found that it was nowhere near as difficult as he’d imagined. He felt as though he could practically touch Fei Du’s bones through that thin layer of skin. Fei Du was clearly the kind of skinny that came from a distinct lack of exercise—a twenty-something-year-old man whose bones would fracture with just a little force. He was more fragile than a pair of glasses, obviously one of those young people who relied on their age to party too hard too often, and thus actually had subpar health. Fei Du’s complexion generally lacked color, and sometimes—when he’d gone overboard with his friends—the pallor of his face was outright unhealthy. He was a classic young libertine, weak from overindulging in sensual pleasures.

Still, he had an icy hardness to him that made others forget that he was like a lavishly embroidered pillow: beautiful but useless.

Luo Wenzhou set Fei Du down on the couch and stretched the muscles of his bruised waist. “Don’t die yet. Can you eat?”

Fei Du didn’t respond. He just pointed weakly to the kitchen.

Luo Wenzhou took two steps, then turned back and picked up a blanket on the couch. He threw it on top of Fei Du and then walked into the kitchen.

The kitchen was clean, probably a housekeeper’s work. The bowls, pots, and other utensils were basically decorations; several things were still in their packaging. Going through all the cupboards, Luo Wenzhou found only a bag of nearly expired sugar. He poured half a cup of purified water from a nearby plastic container and dissolved some of the sugar into it, but just as he was about to bring the cup to Fei Du, he glanced back down at the container. *How long has this water been sitting here?* he thought. *It hasn’t expired, has it?*

He sniffed the water, then found the container’s production date. It must only have been purchased about a week ago, so it was relatively fresh. Luo Wenzhou paused, then opened the fridge door. The fridge was pretty empty: It contained only a few bottles of milk, a small amount of fruit, and some less-than-sumptuous frozen foods, none expired. It was enough food for someone staying a night or two. Had Fei Du just happened to stop by the house recently, or did he come often?

Luo Wenzhou’s understanding was that before Fei Du’s mother died, he hadn’t liked staying at this oppressive house. He normally stayed at the condo near his school, where he had a nanny to take care of him, and only visited once a week, on the weekend. Then, when he was handling the aftermath of his mother’s death, he’d moved back in here for about six months. Fei Du’s father was never around, and it was scary to think of a child all alone in a house where a death had just occurred. That was why Tao Ran had often had Fei Du stay with him instead. Half a year later, Fei Du had moved back to his condo in the city, and everyone who cared about him either openly or secretly at last breathed a sigh of relief.

Luo Wenzhou had assumed that Fei Du hadn’t sold the house only because it was difficult to sell a residence where someone had died. But now…

Deep in thought, he looked back at Fei Du, who still lay on the couch. This house really did seem like one in which someone had died. However exquisitely decorated, well-lit, or clean, it always had an eerie, haunted feeling—it was a rather suitable location for a suicide. From the moment Luo Wenzhou first stepped through the door, he’d thought that something was wrong with this house. But he’d last visited seven years ago—it was a miracle he could even find the door these days—so he couldn’t put a finger on exactly *what* was wrong.

He set the sugar water down in front of Fei Du so that Fei Du could pick it up and drink it. But Fei Du’s hands shook so badly he nearly dropped the cup, so Luo Wenzhou had no choice but to grab it from him and hold it to Fei Du’s lips.

Fei Du sighed lightly. “I won’t be able to keep myself from loving you, Shixiong.”

“Hurry up and drink,” Luo Wenzhou said calmly, although Fei Du’s husky voice made his scalp prickle. “Why do you have so much to say? You’re going to choke.”

Finishing the sugar water, Fei Du finally regained some strength. He flopped down on the couch and waved his hand. “It’s all right. It was just the blood. I threw up too much at the hospital. And Zhou Huaijin was there too, so I didn’t have time to replenish my electrolytes.”

Luo Wenzhou sat with him for a while. “Do you come stay here often?” he asked suddenly.

Fei Du opened his eyes. His posture didn’t change, but Luo Wenzhou sensed that he was on edge.

“This place isn’t close to your company, the university, the bureau… or your mentor’s house. There aren’t any entertainment facilities nearby for your rich, squandering friends either. Do you come all this way just to stay in a house where someone died?”

“Is that a problem?” Fei Du paused, then aimed a flawless smile at him. “This is my home.”

His tone was gentle but his answer defensive, like a needle hidden in cotton. Luo Wenzhou fell silent; there was no way for him to respond.

Criminal investigators often had to work tirelessly day and night, so they developed many bad habits. Whenever Luo Wenzhou fell into deep thought, he wanted to smoke. As he unconsciously looked for an ashtray, he asked Fei Du absentmindedly, “Do you mind if I smoke…?”

He hadn’t even finished the sentence when his gaze and Fei Du’s both landed on the ashtray on the coffee table. Fei Du reacted first, his expression changing. At the same time, Luo Wenzhou finally connected the dots between his fuzzy memory and his vague intuition. Right—he knew what was wrong now!

Neither Fei Du nor his father smoked. The ashtray had belonged to Fei Du’s mother before she died!

Back when he was investigating her cause of death, Luo Wenzhou had come to Fei Du’s house several times to speak with Fei Du’s father, Fei Chengyu. On one such occasion, he’d asked the owner of the house for

permission to smoke, just as he had today. Fei Chengyu—that powerful, shrewd man—had unhappily pulled a ceramic fruit bowl from beneath the table and handed it to him, claiming that he'd gotten rid of all of his wife's belongings after her death for fear that they'd bring back too many painful memories. He'd gone as far as to rearrange all the house's furniture.

He'd even declared, "I moved the TV and got rid of the piano that used to be there. The coat rack by the door, her favorite vases… I cleared out all of them. I can't bear to look at them. Sorry, Officer Luo—I don't smoke, and now that she's gone, we don't keep ashtrays in the house anymore. For now, you'll have to make do with this."

Luo Wenzhou's eyes swept across the entire living room. The TV, the piano, the retro coat rack by the door, and even the vases in the living room foyer had all been put back in their original places. The vases were full of fake flowers, of a high enough quality to look real. Where Fei Du had ordered them from was a mystery, because they looked half-wilted—exactly like the flowers in the vases when Luo Wenzhou had first stepped into this house to investigate the death!

Finally, Luo Wenzhou understood what was weird about this house: Fei Du had preserved it exactly as it had been seven years earlier.

"I'm a little tired today, so I won't keep you any longer," Fei Du said in a particularly stiff tone. He pulled the blanket off himself and sat up to bid his guest goodbye. "Have a good weekend."

He couldn't get rid of Luo Wenzhou that easily. The sergeant leaned back and crossed his legs. "Ah. You said only a moment ago that you wouldn't be able to keep yourself from loving me—you kissed me, touched me, and took advantage of me—and now you're changing your tune? That's not very nice of you, Fei-zong."

Fei Du stiffened. His hand stopped trembling as though he had early signs of Parkinson's, and he gathered himself with a forced smile. "All right," he said smoothly. "If you think you were on the losing end of that bargain, you're welcome to claim what you're owed—"

Before he could finish speaking, Luo Wenzhou barked an angry laugh and leaned down to grab Fei Du by the collar, haul him upward, and force him to the corner of the couch. "The bad habits you get from being spoiled… Do you really think I wouldn't dare do anything to you?"

Chapter 12

EVERY MUSCLE in Fei Du's body was tense, but he forced himself to make a show of looking relaxed. He wrapped an arm around Luo Wenzhou's shoulders completely fearlessly. "Then what would you like to do, Mr. Police Officer?"

His eyes were undeniably beautiful, especially when he smiled. Not even the highest quality tinted contacts could replicate the human eye's natural layers of color, and when light neared Fei Du's pupils, it refracted into different depths. Those eyes contained within them billions of years of evolutionary miracles—fickle emotions and desires; subtle, complex joys and sorrows. They were reminiscent of worlds, like those described in a line of poetry—"To see a world in a grain of sand."[11]

Clearly, this world named "Fei Du" had an indestructible crust.

Studying him up close, Luo Wenzhou swallowed—then, without another word, ripped his collar open so violently that buttons popped and tumbled all over the floor. Subtle goosebumps rose on Fei Du's neck when his skin was exposed to the cold air. The tattoo splayed across his chest depicted a fierce beast that looked as though it was about to open its jaws and swallow someone whole.

Sweeping his gaze over Fei Du, Luo Wenzhou paused on the beast. "I remember you having a different tattoo in Xiling. You got rid of it?"

Fei Du was happy to let Luo Wenzhou look; meanwhile, he let his hands wander over the sergeant's body. "Legend has it that there's nanotechnology that imitates real tattoos, and it's even more waterproof than the makeup synchronized swimmers wear. Obviously, *that's* completely false advertising, so I suggest y-you—ack—don't lick it."

Luo Wenzhou's slightly callused fingers pressed Fei Du's neck, forcing him to look up. Fei Du didn't mind at all; it was as if Luo Wenzhou held not his precious throat but some cheap necktie from a roadside vendor that anyone could twist and warp as they pleased without worrying about

wear and tear. “Why don’t you get a real one?” asked Luo Wenzhou, gazing down at him. “Afraid of the pain?”

Fei Du began to nod easily, but he didn’t manage to complete the motion. Luo Wenzhou suddenly tightened his grasp, interrupting the smooth flow of Fei Du’s breath. Fei Du instinctively shuddered as Luo Wenzhou squeezed the most vulnerable part of his body, but Luo Wenzhou could feel that the pulse in his neck didn’t accelerate at all; it was as unaffected and uncomplicated as a straight line.

With some difficulty, Fei Du smiled at him. “I…didn’t know y-you were into…this sort of thing.”

“After several seconds without air, your lungs experience excruciating, burning pain. Then you start hallucinating from lack of oxygen, and your eyes fill with blood. Your semi-evolved cerebrum panics, stopping all other functions in an attempt to survive. Your limbs go numb and weak, growing unable to struggle. Then you start to lose your senses; you can’t feel your body at all. Your muscles start to spasm, and you die within minutes.” All at once, Luo Wenzhou let go. “It’s a grotesque way to die too. You’re afraid of pain, but not *that*?”

Fei Du seemed to know how to avoid choking; when Luo Wenzhou let go, he didn’t gasp for breath the way a person naturally might. He simply turned his head a little. “It’s just another type of exper—” he began indifferently.

“You’re not afraid of what I’ll do to you,” Luo Wenzhou cut in, one hand braced by Fei Du’s ear. “You’re not afraid I’ll be violent or hurt you. When I squeezed your neck, your heart didn’t even speed up. Why? Because you trust me too much?”

Fei Du let out a strange laugh. “What—can’t I trust you?”

“Oh,” Luo Wenzhou said, his face impassive. “I remember that your dad threw this ashtray out. If you trust me so much, tell me this: Did you buy an identical one? Did you get the original back?”

Fei Du hadn’t expected the flirty conversation to suddenly do a one-eighty. His pupils constricted slightly.

So close up, no change would be minute enough to escape Luo Wenzhou’s eyes. “How come you replaced it? Because you’re still looking

for her cause of death?”

Fei Du gave him a hard push, but Luo Wenzhou was ready for him. The moment Fei Du shoved him, he pressed downward, employing the familiar moves he normally used to catch criminals. He held Fei Du’s hands behind him easily and knelt with one leg on the couch, restraining the other man’s legs.

Fei Du struggled, then realized that he couldn’t exert any force in this position—though of course, the “force” he was capable of wouldn’t have been much use against a professional anyway. He’d always fought with his words, not his hands. With no other way to counterattack, he could only sneer coldly, “If you don’t want to let me fuck you, Sergeant Luo, you can just say it, and we can just be friends. Using violence is a little too ugly—”

He stopped speaking abruptly.

Luo Wenzhou had suddenly bent down to kiss him on the forehead.

Luo Wenzhou grabbed his hair, not very gently, and easily caught the brief panic on Fei Du’s face. How interesting—a playboy who could charm and flirt his way through anything was panicking like a child just because someone had kissed his forehead.

It was like he’d never known tenderness before.

For some reason, his panic affected Luo Wenzhou much more strongly than facing Fei-zong’s various verbal flirtation techniques had. He swallowed subtly and moved to kiss him again; then, however, he suppressed the urge with great difficulty and slowly let Fei Du go.

“You’re not scared that I’ll hurt you—you hand me your body and life like you don’t care—but you’re scared of me asking a few irrelevant questions. Does being honest seem harder to you than dying?” Luo Wenzhou asked.

Fei Du sat up but kept his mouth shut, neither answering nor making any more jabs.

“Actually, there was an incident in my life that I’ve always had suspicions about too,” Luo Wenzhou said. “I’ll tell you about it, if you let me.”

Fei Du remained silent. Ignoring him, Luo Wenzhou continued. “When I’d just graduated, I felt like I was destined for something great. Whenever I had time, I went online to look up those ‘Greatest Unsolved Cases of Wherever’ posts. Then I’d stupidly try to analyze the cases based on ‘details’ that were really just rumors flying around the internet. Sometimes I disagreed with someone online and even argued with them. In the end, every case led me to the same conclusion: People who discussed such things online were dumbasses.”

Fei Du’s eyes moved slightly.

“Back then, transmigration novels were popular with girls, and all the TV shows were about time-traveling to the Qing dynasty to marry a prince or something. When I heard my female classmates talk about it, I figured that if I transmigrated, I’d go back to the Victorian era and find Jack the Ripper.” Sergeant Luo was thick-skinned, with an abundance of experience, so he thought nothing of exposing his naive, embarrassing past. Even more amazing, Fei Du didn’t take the opportunity to make a single sarcastic quip. “Then, after I started working, I realized that being a police officer was nothing like that. At the time, city policy was that newbies needed at least one year of experience at one of the lowest-level police stations, so I came to this area’s local station.”

Luo Wenzhou waved a hand in front of Fei Du’s eyes. “Do you know what police officers at local stations do?”

Fei Du looked up at him.

“They assist with things like keys locked inside a house, lost dogs, kids getting their teeth knocked out in fights, leaks from tenants upstairs… They’re approached with all kinds of tiny, insignificant, annoying problems. The biggest case dumb rookies like us would get to handle was catching a few picklocks. The only case I dealt with that meant anything was your mother’s suicide—and I nearly made enemies of the victim’s family. So that really didn’t end on a good note. After a year, I thought, *Any more of this, and I’ll hang myself*. I dragged Tao Ran with me to the municipal bureau entrance exams. But things weren’t much better after I made it there either. Everyone thought that I got the job because of my father. They thought I was a nepo baby who talked the talk, but didn’t have the skill to walk the walk. I used to get scolded every day, especially by Lao-Yang. He was

especially harsh and made me do all the jobs that no one else wanted. It was like he had a grudge against me. I'd been raised as my family's spoiled little treasure, and I thought I couldn't continue at the bureau. I suffered injustices day in and day out, and my salary didn't even cover the cigarettes I smoked. I lasted half a year. Then I was about to hand in my notice when Lao-Yang asked me to join him when he spoke with an informant in a prostitution ring case."

He picked up the ashtray and lit a cigarette.

Fei Du finally gave him a little response. "Hm…?"

"Back then, those kinds of syndicates were like gangs. Plenty of girls were scammed or tricked into joining. As Lao-Yang chatted with the informant, a girl ran out with her face covered in blood. Two men chased her with a bat and a switchblade. The girl was crying for help as she ran, and no one around batted an eye. The blood rushed to my head, and I went to fight them—but when I defeated those two, more came out." Luo Wenzhou spread his hands. "Ever poked a hornet's nest?"

"Why would I?"

Luo Wenzhou sighed regretfully. "If you haven't, you can't appreciate the fear and adrenaline I felt then. Still, in the end, we saved the girl—although we suffered a beating. Lao-Yang was stabbed in the back and thigh while protecting me, and he got his kneecap busted. But despite how much trouble I got us in, he didn't scold me even once. He said I might not be that reliable, but I'd finally acted as a police officer should. And all his reprimands might've given me Stockholm syndrome, because after those first words of praise, I went straight home and ripped up my resignation notice. From then on, I was his loyal dog."

Fei Du's face relaxed a little, and a hint of a smile played at his lips.

"But that's not the point of the story." Now that he'd tried to cheer Fei Du up, he adopted a more serious tone. "The point is that Lao-Yang's knee never fully recovered. He was always on the heavy side, and as he aged, his knee struggled to support him. Whenever it was about to rain, he was in a lot of pain—it was more reliable than the weather report. So he avoided stairs as much as he could. But the day he died, he lost his life in an underpass. There was a street-level pedestrian crossing less than two hundred feet away."

Stairs were hard on the knees, so older people with mobility issues usually avoided over- and underpasses, even if that meant taking a slight detour. Yang Zhengfeng had been returning home from the market. Outside of work, the man's main interests were strolling through markets and cooking, so it was a route he often took. There was no way he'd have chosen the underpass instead of the pedestrian crossing for his everyday walk.

"How come he took the underpass that day?" Luo Wenzhou posed the question lightly in the silent living room. "The wanted man was hiding pretty far in, but no street-level passersby could've seen him. I still can't figure out why Lao-Yang went down there. Secretly, I even looked into his call records for that day—nothing. His phone's call log was clean. Almost too clean. In the few days before and after, he hadn't received a single suspicious call, not even a spam call."

"So the old officer got groceries and ran into a fugitive on the way home, then made a phone call asking for help," said Fei Du. "Was there any other information?"

"There was a witness," said Luo Wenzhou. "Lao-Yang was only carrying a bunch of celery and a bag of ground meat. He was defenseless, and he wasn't about to make any rash moves. But then that old lady with the dog happened to pass by the criminal and startle him. Lao-Yang saw that a bystander was in danger. That's why he got involved."

"What about the criminal?"

"The criminal wasn't in the right mental state for us to get anything out of him. We also looked into the witness, but there were no red flags with her. Residents of the area confirmed that the old lady lived nearby and passed through that spot every day to go to the park and walk her dog."

A coincidence with clear cause and effect. An old officer dying in a brave act. A perfect accident.

"I've mentioned my suspicions to the bureau before," said Luo Wenzhou. "My coworkers and bosses all participated in the investigation. Nothing came of it, though. You know, you'd usually think that when someone like Lao-Yang died, his friends and family wouldn't be able to accept it. They'd dream up a killer so that their grief would have a target…"

"…just like I did back then, you mean," Fei Du finished.

"Just like how you did back then." Luo Wenzhou suddenly grabbed Fei Du's hand. Fei Du reflexively tried to pull away, but Luo Wenzhou clutched his hand even tighter. "It was after that incident that I realized—maybe there was a good reason for you to have such adamant suspicions about what caused your mother's death. But Fei Du…" Luo Wenzhou looked up at him. "You can remember her forever, never giving up on the truth, but you can't let yourself be *trapped* in that. And I forgot to tell you something that day. Actually—"

Fei Du yanked his hand free. "Her cause of death isn't what's keeping me trapped."

Luo Wenzhou froze.

"It's not that." Fei Du shook his head and looked away, staring at the ashtray on the table. After a long silence, he squeezed out his next words, seemingly using the last of his strength. "I know how she died… It's not that."

If a soul could sweat, Luo Wenzhou's would've been drenched by now. The sergeant was so nervous that he could have stuttered; when he realized he'd used all his tricks to pry Fei Du's mouth open just a tiny sliver, for a second, he was afraid that tiny sliver would close back up again.

Holding his breath, he spoke very gently, as though afraid of startling something. "You know how she died?"

Fei Du gritted his teeth, his body a string pulled so taut it was about to snap.

Luo Wenzhou's heart sank. He immediately wanted to say something to lighten the mood, but without another word, the normally smooth and slick Fei Du abandoned his guest in the living room and walked upstairs toward the bedroom. Luo Wenzhou was about to go after him when suddenly his phone rang. He furrowed his brow but had no choice but to pick up. "What is it, Tao Ran?"

"You heard about that fire at the Dong family's home, right?" Tao Ran said quickly. "They put it out, and now we're inside. It's obvious that someone started the fire deliberately. They lit some paper and threw it onto the upholstered couch. The apartment opposite the Dongs' had a security

camera on their front door monitoring the hallway. It showed a man who stood about five foot nine. But he was wrapped up very securely from head to toe and never revealed his face."

A click sounded from upstairs. Fei Du had locked the door.

Luo Wenzhou knew that he'd missed his chance. Sighing soundlessly, he forced himself to concentrate on the call. "What's in that place that led someone to set fire to it?"

Tao Ran looked around Dong Xiaoqing's ruined residence. The damage wasn't that serious. The fire had begun in the living room, so it had destroyed most of the wooden furniture; the walls were blackened, and the TV's carbon-steel frame had melted slightly. Everything else was unharmed, though. The TV wall and the shelving around it were all still intact. The property certificate, deposit book, and other important documents in the drawers were also fine.

"When we investigated the Dong family before, we went over everything multiple times, including the father and daughter's internet history, emails, and social media. We also searched their home. So it has to be something really inconspicuous—"

Luo Wenzhou interrupted him impatiently. "That scope is too broad."

"—or something that wasn't in their home at the time," Tao Ran finished unhurriedly, too even-tempered to be angry at the interruption. "What's the matter? Are you in the middle of something urgent?"

Luo Wenzhou didn't know what to say.

"I'll talk to you later, then," Tao Ran said in an understanding tone. "I'll deal with things on my end, then report to you."

"Wait, Tao Ran," Luo Wenzhou said in a rush. "This case might be much more complicated than we imagined. When you're out investigating, you need to be careful. From now on, no one involved in this case can work alone."

Tao Ran had been his partner for many years. Hearing the impatience in Luo Wenzhou's voice, he didn't say anything else, just responded with a quick and concise "Understood" and hung up.

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"DEPUTY TAO," Xiao Haiyang said, approaching him, "it was the paper. I think the thing the perpetrator was looking for was the same paper he lit to start the fire."

Tao Ran looked up. "What's your reasoning?"

"When a fire breaks out in a high-density apartment block like this, the neighbors notice quickly and call the police. So if the perpetrator hadn't confirmed that the thing he wanted to get rid of was destroyed, the fire very likely wouldn't go on long enough—and it might leave something behind." Despite his best efforts, Xiao Haiyang started to speak more quickly again. "Also, Dong Qian didn't receive a high level of education. I came to this apartment a few times. There were a few flyers but not much else to read in the living room. And all the writing and drawing supplies were in Dong Xiaoqing's study. The footage showed that after the arsonist got into the Dongs' home, he stayed for over ten minutes. Starting a fire doesn't take that long. He must've been looking for something—and, after finding it, he set fire to it. Once he'd confirmed that it had burned enough, he threw it onto the couch, which set the whole apartment on fire."

Tao Ran furrowed his brow. "Don't you think that's weird? This person got into Dong Xiaoqing's home undetected—couldn't he just have taken whatever it was that he wanted? Why'd he have to burn the place? Causing such a commotion and leaving behind video evidence… Was he deliberately trying to get the police to investigate the fire?"

Xiao Haiyang froze, unable to respond.

"Haiyang, this makes me think that—in the arsonist's eyes—whatever it was that Dong Xiaoqing had wasn't a huge secret. They caused such a mystifying fire…as a challenge to us." Tao Ran pointed at his phone. "Go find out whether the person who texted you was really Dong Xiaoqing, or if someone stole her number."

Xiao Haiyang accepted the phone but didn't move his feet. "Deputy Tao, is Dong Xiaoqing really dead?"

Lang Qiao had already sent photos to Tao Ran, and the body of Dong Xiaoqing herself was now with the forensics team. Tao Ran sighed and patted Xiao Haiyang's shoulder.

"I…I talked to her many times," Xiao Haiyang said. "And I formed my own private judgment of her. She definitely wasn't the type to pick up a knife and hurt someone. Even if she did feel fury or resentment, it was only directed at the people who'd criticized her father. She would never have involved the car-crash victim's family. But she stabbed someone. Then she was immediately killed in a hit-and-run to silence her. And at the same time, her home was burned. Someone must be behind all this!"

Slowly pulling Xiao Haiyang's phone from his hand, Tao Ran saw that he'd been looking at a news website. The news of how Zhou Huaijin and his brother were attacked at the hospital entrance was already spreading. The report itself was short—just one line naming the victims and culprit. Still, the readers let their imaginations run wild, adding explanations that they thought covered the cause and effect of the situation.

Xiao Haiyang's voice shook. "She wasn't the way they're describing her. Really."

"My shifu asked me something before he passed," Tao Ran said, returning Xiao Haiyang's phone to him. "He asked, 'Do you believe that the heavens always punish those who deserve it'?"

Xiao Haiyang looked at him blankly.

"I said, 'Of course not.' After all, wasn't that just superstition? Besides, old sayings like that always contradict each other. There's 'The heavens will punish those who deserve it,' and then there's 'The good die young, but the evil live forever.' Who knows which you should believe?" Tao Ran smiled. "But my shifu told me, 'You don't need to believe any of the others, but you do need to believe this one, because you're a police officer. When you're tracking down a suspect, *you're* the heavens. But that saying exists because people like you weren't capable enough—because you police officers couldn't find the truth and fix the injustice.' Those words were harsh, but he had a point. Let's do our best, little comrade. Start with the texts. If you have any thoughts, you can share them with us so we can all discuss them together. And don't keep getting stuck splitting hairs—press forward."

Xiao Haiyang opened his mouth and adjusted his glasses, then darted off to ask the technical department for help.

Tao Ran looked around at the fire's chaotic aftermath and sighed. Without thinking about it—and probably because he'd mentioned Yang Zhengfeng to Little Four-Eyes just now—he pulled out his phone and opened up the Zero Degree Reading app. His eyes fell on the newest introduction: *"So foul and fair a day I have not seen."—Macbeth. Submitted by The Reciter.*

The last thing Yang Zhengfeng mentioned had been 88.6 FM. And only Tao Ran, in a state of extreme panic, had heard it. He hadn't even had his body cam, so he had no proof beyond his own blurry memory. After Luo Wenzhou raised his suspicions about the underpass, they'd looked into the old officer's last words too, thoroughly investigating the person in charge of the radio program on that station at 12:05 a.m., as well as all its employees. But that all came to nothing. However hard they looked at it, it was just a niche audiobook program.

Back then, the investigation team had concluded that the old radio that Yang Zhengfeng carried around with him had fallen out in the brawl and just happened to land on that channel. They posited that Tao Ran might've heard the radio at the time and, given everything that happened, misattributed what he'd heard to Lao-Yang.

Tao Ran had refused to give up. He'd followed the program for two months. But besides feeling like he'd retaken a middle-school supplementary reading class, he'd gained nothing. Memories were too subjective and imprecise, and slowly, even Tao Ran started to accept the "misattribution" explanation…or would have, if he hadn't gotten into the habit of listening to Zero Degree Reading's books and—through that boring pastime—discovered the username "The Reciter." That user used to turn up very rarely—maybe less than once a year.

Before, Tao Ran had always thought that he was being overly paranoid. Yet this unrelated reading app had subtly hinted at three cases in the last six months. Perhaps that was coincidence, but if so, it was a bit incredible.

In that scorched living room, Tao Ran stared at the title the Reciter had posted for a full minute. A shiver ran down his spine.

ON THE OTHER END of their call, Luo Wenzhou hung up, his thoughts heavy. He strolled around the living room by himself a few times, then decided to head upstairs to find Fei Du. As he climbed the steps, he unthinkingly glanced down and saw the path to the basement. He paused, suddenly remembering Fei Du's description of his basement on the way to Heng'ai Hospital.

Luo Wenzhou's feet turned of their own accord, and he headed downstairs.

The stairs to the basement turned at an angle, which meant the upstairs light couldn't reach down to that level. Luo Wenzhou's surroundings grew steadily darker.

A heavy security door with a number lock had been installed at the bottom of the stairs. After staring at the lock for a while, Luo Wenzhou pulled out his phone to call Fei Du. It rang twice, and then the call disconnected. The homeowner upstairs clearly didn't want to speak to him. Luo Wenzhou opened the lock's keypad and observed it for a moment, realizing that it was alarmed—in other words, if someone tried to force their way in or input the wrong password, the entire house would erupt in shrill sirens.

"How loud is this alarm?" A bad idea popped into Luo Wenzhou's head. "Maybe it'll shock that chicken upstairs into coming down. However you slice it, that'd be more civilized than breaking down his door."

His back injury wasn't a problem anymore, but it still hurt. He didn't want to do anything as strenuous as kick down a door today. Thus, he reached his annoying paws out and input a random six-digit code, then quickly put his fingers in his ears. But after a while, the alarm hadn't sounded. The light on the door flashed twice, and the door itself opened with a click.

Luo Wenzhou was astonished. He lowered his hand awkwardly and, incredulous, stared at the door. Then he realized he'd entered the date on which Fei Du's mother had unexpectedly died.

He hadn't expected to serendipitously guess the right combination. He stared for a while, eyes and mouth wide, then glanced up the stairs

hesitantly and called Fei Du again. *All right. The brat turned off his phone.*

"Don't blame me, then," Luo Wenzhou muttered. "To me, all silence is implicit agreement." With that, he stepped self-righteously into the most mysterious corner of the house.

Facing the damp, cold underground air, he turned on the lights—and froze.

The desk that Fei Du had described wasn't there. The room was very open and empty. The floor, walls, cabinets, shelves, and ceilings were all stark white. In the middle of the space was a fancy projector with a screen large enough for a small movie theatre. There was a chair with straps directly facing the screen; next to it was a computer, a bunch of complicated equipment that Luo Wenzhou didn't know the purpose of, and a small freezer.

For no reason, a layer of cold sweat broke out over Luo Wenzhou's palms. Pushing open the freezer gently, he found a row of small vials. He couldn't read the descriptions—they were all written in an unknown foreign language. And he didn't know whether his mind was just playing tricks on him, but he thought he smelled a hint of blood.

What did Fei Du *do* in here?!

Luo Wenzhou's heart rate instantly shot up to a hundred fifty. His mind went blank for a second, and he was frozen to the spot. A thousand bees seemed to be flying around his ears. After a long time, he bit the tip of his tongue lightly. Then he forcefully shook his head, looked around him, and dismissed his assumption, thinking, *No—that's not right. There are no weapons here.*

Considering Fei Du's weaker-than-average physique, it was unlikely he'd be able to do anything in here unarmed.

Trying his best to calm down, Luo Wenzhou carefully studied the recliner with the straps. His heart, which was almost in his throat, settled back down in his chest, and he let out a breath of relief. The straps were like seat belts—the chair's occupant could fasten and unfasten them themselves—so they probably wouldn't be very useful as restraints during a murder or dismemberment.

Luo Wenzhou reached out to touch the leather recliner, then snapped photos of the unknown equipment and vials. Sending the images to Lang Qiao, he asked her to figure out exactly what they were.

A pair of earphones hung from the back of the chair. Luo Wenzhou put them on and turned on the audiovisual equipment in front of him.

First, the soothing melody of “You Raise Me Up” flowed into his ears through the high-quality earphones. When it came to technology, you really got what you paid for. All else aside, Luo Wenzhou had never known that this song could sound so good. But just as he was admiring the way the wealthy could enjoy the finer things in life, a hysterical scream pierced the music without warning. However mentally strong Luo Wenzhou was, he couldn’t help the way his body jolted at that.

Then the screen lit up. Luo Wenzhou looked upward quickly.

It was playing a recorded livestream of a killing. The video had been uploaded a few years ago by a crazed murderer abroad. The culprit had already met whatever maker his people had, and the video had basically been scrubbed from the internet, but it still circulated on the dark web.

The victim let out a scream like a dying animal. Their shrieks intertwined with the music, the earphones producing both sounds with superb quality, like two whips lashing at the listener’s soul. Goosebumps erupted all over Luo Wenzhou’s body. He ripped the earphones from his ears and fast-forwarded through the video. It was followed by a video of a beheading, then an execution by shooting, terrorist organizations torturing hostages and captives, and all kinds of bloody photos…

Luo Wenzhou’s phone, which was set to vibrate, suddenly buzzed. It gave him such a start that he nearly threw it to the ground. When he answered, his voice didn’t even sound right. “Hello?”

“Boss, where are you right now? Can you talk?” Lang Qiao asked quietly. “You didn’t break into an unlicensed detox center, did you?”

Luo Wenzhou’s brow furrowed. “Detox center?”

“I asked someone to look at those photos you sent,” said Lang Qiao. “They show equipment for administering electric shocks. Some of the medicine is sedatives, some induces vomiting, and some cause similar unpleasant stress responses…”

Luo Wenzhou didn’t hear the rest. He felt like something had hit him hard in the forehead. In an instant, the mist before him parted, revealing a corner of the deeply hidden truth to him.

So that’s what it was, he thought. Why the mere sight of blood could make Fei Du vomit to the point of dehydration, why Fei Du couldn’t stop trembling, the endlessly repeating song… Those all had an explanation now.

Chapter 13

"HELLO? HELLO? HELLO?" Hearing the other end of the phone call go silent, Lang Qiao felt a sudden flash of panic. "Are you still there, Boss? Can you make some noise? Your silence is really freaking me out!"

"Mm," Luo Wenzhou responded distractedly. "It's all right. You continue with what you were doing."

Then, ignoring Lang Qiao's loud protests, he hung up.

The basement's ventilation was poor; an old, stale scent clung to the air, and the vague smell of blood lingered inside the stark white walls. A long strand of hair had gotten caught in one of the earphones' ear hooks. Luo Wenzhou picked it out carefully, his finger smoothing over the icy cold recliner.

A few of the straps showed clear wear and tear.

This was a classic aversion-therapy setup: As the videos played on the projector, the electric shocks and drugs would condition the person strapped to the chair to react reflexively. It would force him to associate watching the video with excruciating pain, provoking a physiological disgust response to "correct" certain behaviors…or thoughts.

The human body was a precise instrument: It got hungry when tasty food appeared, felt attraction at the sight of beautiful people, experienced pain when hit, and cried tears when sad. Every single feeling corresponded to a sensation transmitted by one of the five senses. Correspondingly, this simple yet crude aversion therapy would be like forcibly rewiring that "instrument," switching the wires to all the wrong spots and then soldering them in place to reinforce them.

But how could you treat a human with a flesh-and-blood body like an easily rewired circuit board? Even DIY rewiring a circuit board could cause it to short-circuit—to say nothing of a mortal body.

The corner of Luo Wenzhou's eye twitched as he thought about Fei Du's ever-changing tattoos. As it turned out, he didn't just still have

“eighth-grade syndrome”—his tattoos covered up the marks left behind by electric shocks.

So did Fei Du return here every so often to “recharge his batteries”?

Wasn’t he afraid of accidentally doing himself irreparable damage…? He could even accidentally kill himself. If he did, his body would rot in this dark basement; no one would even notice his death for months. Since he was a young master particular about everything from his food to his clothes, even the arms of his glasses, wasn’t he afraid that he’d be found as a rotting pile of maggot-eaten flesh?

Luo Wenzhou took a deep breath. He suddenly felt that Fei Du really might not be afraid of that.

The young man felt no fear of death, and he didn’t take care of his mortal body. He had no reservations and seemed to care for nothing. If he did die here suddenly one day, he might even accept that fate rather easily. Free and uninhibited, Fei Du enjoyed everything that the world had to offer; he didn’t care whom he hung out with or slept with. It was like he embodied the word “whatever.”

But why would he strap himself to a chair and shock himself, playing recklessly with his own life, rather than being even a little truthful with others?

The eerie, chilly basement air enveloped Luo Wenzhou. After his initial shock and complex array of emotions, he felt a burning fury so intense his head swam. He almost wanted to charge up to the second floor, break down Fei Du’s door, drag him to the sink, and dunk him in cold water to really teach him a lesson. That asshole had pretended to be sincere again and again. He’d gotten close enough to Luo Wenzhou that the sergeant nearly accepted him into his heart. But that asshole had just been toying with him. Fei Du could shrink back into his doorless, windowless fortress at any moment and coldly hold everyone at arm’s length. He was debasing himself and Luo Wenzhou’s feelings for him.

Luo Wenzhou turned and left the basement, taking the stairs two at a time.

He found that Fei Du didn’t stay in his childhood bedroom. Rather, he’d taken up the room in which his mother had committed suicide. From

the outside, that chamber was silent. Luo Wenzhou didn’t know what he was doing hiding in there.

Calming himself, Luo Wenzhou knocked on the door.

Startled, Fei Du swung his gaze toward the door. Then he turned to face it, some life finally appearing in his glassy eyes.

“Fei Du, open the door. I have something to say to you.”

Fei Du stared at the door, unmoving. He thought of something and the corners of his lips suddenly stretched upward in an expression akin to a smile. It was as though he was watching a movie, though it wasn’t clear what he thought would happen next. He remained silent.

Luo Wenzhou paused for a moment, then gave him a final ultimatum. “Locking me out, huh? Fei Du, I’m giving you thirty seconds. If you don’t open this door, I’ll never knock on your door again.”

In the room next to the window was a rattan hanging chair. When Fei Du sat there, he could survey his entire garden. As he looked out now, though, there really wasn’t much to see—only big slabs of limestone. Stretching his legs out, Fei Du leaned lazily back into the nest-like chair. It swayed with his movements.

When he heard Luo Wenzhou’s words, he looked down stubbornly and turned to the window. *Then don’t,* he thought. *Go.*

The wall clock’s second hand ticked ceaselessly on. Luo Wenzhou did exactly as he’d promised: He waited precisely thirty seconds, and then Fei Du heard his footsteps outside the door and his shoes slapping the stairs.

Luo Wenzhou walked further and further away until, after a while, Fei Du could no longer hear him.

Fei Du stayed still for a while. Then he opened the little screen on top of the bed’s headboard, which was connected to the cameras at the front door. He watched Luo Wenzhou walk away from this house haunted by death, get in his car, and drive off. For a while, he stared in the direction in which the car had left—though with his gaze restricted by the camera’s field of view, he quickly lost track of his target.

He still felt nothing in his heart. All it did was jump slightly, the way it had when he saw Zhou Huaixin’s body. But last time, it had only been a

small jump, as though he'd driven over a small chunk of stone. This time his heart lurched and veered much further, as though he'd run over a brick.

What a shame, he thought. The next time he went to the municipal bureau, he'd have to see Luo Wenzhou's cold face again.

Still, it wasn't a big deal. Fei Du wouldn't stay much longer at the bureau either way. His heart might just have driven over a brick, but its performance was good. It could drive even if it got banged up a little. That wasn't a problem.

Fei Du closed his eyes silently. He was still exhausted; perhaps he hadn't fully recovered from the low blood sugar and dehydration after heaving at the sight of blood. He'd originally intended to go sit in the basement for a while after he got rid of Luo Wenzhou, but now he was so worn out that he didn't even want to move. Closing his eyes, he dozed off.

He didn't know whether it was a memory or a dream, but in the hazy state between wakefulness and sleep, his youth came to mind.

After he saw his mother off for the last time, he hadn't wanted to live with an outsider, so he'd gotten rid of his nanny. He went often to Tao Ran's place for food, though. One day, he'd gone to the bureau as usual to wait for Tao Ran to get off work. On the way, he passed through a neighborhood and happened to witness an argument between a homeowner and their property manager. The pair were talking over one another, more aggressive by the second, so Fei Du called the police to mediate.

Luo Wenzhou and Tao Ran had been the officers who showed up; Fei Du watched them from afar. Luo Wenzhou stood between the two middle-aged parties, awkward and out of place, like a TV-soap heartthrob who'd stumbled onto the set of a family sitcom.

The young bottom-rung officers had done their best to mediate this community conflict, but the two arguing parties kept pushing them around. Out of respect for his position as an officer of the law, Luo Wenzhou reined in his aggravation for five minutes, but that was his limit; at that point, he flew into a rage. Joining the battle as the third party, he lit into both of the others. Tao Ran had broken out in a cold sweat.

Thanks to Luo Wenzhou's exceptional combat skills, the homeowner and property manager had no choice but to strike a temporary truce and

team up against him. Thus, Luo Wenzhou had managed to accidentally resolve the conflict. Even as Tao Ran forcibly dragged him away, he was still yelling back at them, “Go report me! Don’t be pussies! If you don’t report me, you’re cowards! My badge number is XXXXX—”

Tao Ran had slapped a hand over Luo Wenzhou’s mouth, thinking about the court case that would ensue. Now unable to speak, Luo Wenzhou resorted to the next best thing: He flipped the bird at the old-lady army that had dared provoke him.

Even after walking some distance away, Fei Du still heard Luo Wenzhou’s arrogant words: “They want to order me around for the meager change we’re paid every month?! Fuck being a police officer. I’m not taking this shit anymore!”

“Hey! You can’t throw your badge away!” Tao Ran protested.

His words were still hanging in the air when they spotted a pickpocket nabbing a girl’s wallet across the street. Luo Wenzhou forgot all about having thrown his badge in the garbage. He barked “Stop!” and—like a big, well-trained dog—shot off after the thief.

He ended up catching his target, and after the girl made a report at the station, she treated the officers to a meal of barbecue skewers, Fei Du tagging along. He didn’t know why he remembered this so well—he even remembered the order in which their dishes had come to their table… Maybe the food at the roadside stall had just been that disgusting.

In the glow of the sunset, everyone around them had been holding beers and bragging. The fragrance of cumin and chili flakes wrapped in gutter oil drifted hundreds of yards. The stall teemed with life, people sitting around talking nonsense with sweat dripping down their faces.

Fei Du had been too lazy to interact with anyone. He’d swigged his drink casually as he sat to one side, playing a video game.

Oh, right—it had apparently been Luo Wenzhou who got him that console. No wonder the officer kept glancing at him that night.

Luo Wenzhou had handed him a skewer of mushrooms disdainfully. “Going out for skewers is for adults, Tao Ran. Why are you always bringing him along? Hey, brat—you at least eat mushrooms, right? You’re so picky. Not like one of us at all.”

Not like one of us.

Fei Du smiled. He didn’t want to be like them.

After bidding the girl goodbye, the most unreliable police officer in history happily ran back to the spot where they’d been earlier. He stared at the trash can that had swallowed his badge. With a dark expression that could have entertained Fei Du for a year, he spent three full minutes gathering his courage, then found a piece of wire in his pocket and picked the trash-can lock…

The click of the lock startled Fei Du in his doze; it seemed to be right next to his ear. At the same moment, a sudden draft blew over the back of his neck. Waking with a start, Fei Du turned around in disbelief, abruptly realizing that Luo Wenzhou—whom he’d watched drive off—was back, now with a long, thin wire in hand.

Fei Du had no words. This guy really was familiar with lock-picking.

Luo Wenzhou stuffed the wire into his pocket. “I said I wouldn’t knock again. Get the fuck out here.” Seeing Fei Du frozen there, silent, Luo Wenzhou barged into the room and dragged him to his feet. “Look at the time.”

“It’s 6:30 p.m.,” Fei Du responded automatically.

His frank, overly literal answer made Luo Wenzhou pause. Then he smacked the back of Fei Du’s neck. “No shit. You think I can’t read a clock? It’s 6:30, and you’re still sitting there meditating? What about dinner?”

Fei Du had sat too long. His legs were a little numb. He stumbled as Luo Wenzhou dragged him along, feeling even more shocked when he saw the food on the table—especially the complicated-looking noodle broth. The noodles in the little pot were still steaming, and the utensils that had just been decorations up till now had finally been put to use. The unfamiliar aroma of food flooded the desolate first floor, and the entire haunted house had become unfamiliar too.

“Your nearest supermarket has a terrible selection. I had to drive six miles just to get groceries. What advantages does living here have, beyond offering the chance to act cool and show off your wealth?” Luo Wenzhou grabbed a bowl. “Do you want noodles straight from the pot? Or do you

want me to rinse them in cold water first?” Before Fei Du could even open his mouth, Luo Wenzhou decided for him. “Oh, right—you just threw up. Definitely no cold water. You’ll just have to deal with hot noodles for now.”

Fei Du said nothing. He didn’t think he had an appetite. He could never stomach food when his hematophobia made him nauseous, nor after electroshock therapy and the other horrors had tortured him to his very limits. He usually just got by with an IV from the hospital.

After accepting the bowl from Luo Wenzhou, though, he somehow finished the whole thing. The noodles were just the right texture, a bit chewy but not so hard that they’d be difficult to digest. As he swallowed them, they were still warm, and the ice-cold rock in his stomach slowly started to melt.

Fei Du put down his chopsticks. He was about to say something, but Luo Wenzhou grabbed his bowl and refilled it. “Hey, wait. I can’t…”

“Eat it. Finish it, and then come back with me to do overtime,” said Luo Wenzhou. “We don’t have this weekend off.”

Once again, Fei Du had no words.

Luo Wenzhou looked up at him. “Do you object?”

Fei Du accepted the bowl. “Oh. No.”

Luo Wenzhou waited for him to finish eating, then said suddenly, “In my experience, eighty to ninety percent of dissatisfaction stems from one of two things: You either haven’t slept enough or haven’t eaten enough.”

Fei Du froze.

“Eating sweets and taking sleep meds don’t count.” Luo Wenzhou glanced at him meaningfully, but before Fei Du could intuit what he meant, Luo Wenzhou continued. “The other ten to twenty percent is more complicated. I wanted to tell you that back when we were in front of Su Xiaolan’s urn, but I forgot.”

Fei Du didn’t respond.

Luo Wenzhou’s tone changed. “Go wash the dishes. Don’t use the dishwasher—there’s too few. I put out the detergent and dishcloth. Wipe the oil off the dishes, then rinse them with water. Do you know how to do that?”

Fei Du had nothing to say.

“If you don’t, then learn. Whoever cooks doesn’t have to do the dishes. That’s a basic principle.”

Fei Du might never have washed dishes in his life. Still, after some hesitation, he left for the kitchen. Luo Wenzhou wasn’t worried that he’d smash all the dishes. The brat had money; he could afford to replace them.

“When a human body is cremated, the composition of the ashes is similar to apatite—really not worth revering. So how come we take them so seriously?” Luo Wenzhou crossed his arms, walking up behind Fei Du. “How come the year begins and ends with New Year’s? How come people have to confess their feelings and date someone before it’s acceptable to take them to bed? How come legal cohabitation involves inviting a bunch of friends and family to a totally useless ceremony? Isn’t the paperwork enough? I’ll tell you why: It’s because people give special meaning to life and death, time, separation and union. You can’t see or touch it, nor can you know its function, but that illusory ‘meaning’ might be the only difference between us humans and a bunch of carbon.”

Fei Du stilled.

Luo Wenzhou reached from behind the younger man to grab his wrist and guide him on where to put the clean bowl. “If you don’t get that, I can explain it to you more slowly some other time. When you came on to me, that was a ritual with meaning too. I gave you a chance to change your mind, but now it’s too late for returns and refunds. Come on—let’s head back to the bureau.”

***

LANG QIAO DIDN’T KNOW what was up with Luo Wenzhou. For a while, she’d been worried that her sergeant—“Captain China”—had entered another risky situation. She was afraid to leave in case he called on her for backup.

But she never received his call for help. Instead, she got a threat straight from the man himself: *Be good, and keep what I just told you a secret, and I'll bring you red braised pork belly one of these days. But if you leak the info, I'll substitute you for the pork!*

Lang Qiao took a beat. She thought that, if she had any less self-control, she might become the first princess in history to commit patricide over braised pork.

The prettiest girl at the bureau pictured beating up her boss as she dutifully organized all the information on Zhou Junmao's case. A dizzying number of unexpected events had happened that day, and the entire country welcomed the weekend while glued to this rich, influential clan's family drama. Only the municipal bureau was working through the weekend, buried under wave upon wave of developments.

"I made plans to go see a movie with my old classmates this weekend," Lang Qiao complained at the meeting room door. "How come we've got overtime again?" she cried out, holding her eyelids taut with her fingers. "It's so annoying."

"Boy or girl classmates?" Luo Wenzhou asked casually, walking past her.

"Girls. Duh."

"Well, you don't plan on marrying a girl, so what's the point in hanging out with girls all day?" Luo Wenzhou flapped an uncaring hand at her. "You might as well work. At least you get the princess treatment here."

"Fuck off. What country treats their princess like a donkey? A conquered one?" Lang Qiao rolled her eyes at Luo Wenzhou's back, then shot Fei Du a confused glance. "Hey, Fei-zong, how come you're still here too?"

Fei Du didn't say anything, because—despite having pondered it the entire way here—he didn't know either why a nonemployee like him was giving up his weekend fun to do "overtime" back here. He could only smile at Lang Qiao.

Once everyone had sat down in the meeting room, Fei Du finally told Luo Wenzhou, "I don't think I get overtime pay."

“No ‘I thinks’ about it—you don’t even get a salary, just a small subsidy from the project,” Luo Wenzhou replied. Not waiting for Fei Du to respond, he added self-deprecatingly, “The difference between getting paid and not getting paid is essentially the difference between ‘almost zero’ and ‘zero,’ so it doesn’t make a difference, does it, Fei-zong?”

Luo Wenzhou had stolen Fei Du’s line. With no way to even start a retort, Fei Du was forced to sit up straight and keep his mouth shut.

“Right now, there are two things we’re pretty much certain of,” said Lang Qiao. “One, the entire Zhou Huaijin kidnapping case was staged by Zhou Huaijin himself. His co-conspirator, Hu Zhenyu, has been brought in for questioning too. Two, Dong Xiaoqing murdered Zhou Huaixin. We have both security footage and witness testimony, so there’s nothing to debate on that front. But then Dong Xiaoqing herself was killed and her home set on fire. Right now, we’re not clear on the suspect or their motive. But we can deduce that the perp is connected to Dong Xiaoqing’s target, Zhou Huaijin.”

It was evident that, as soon as Lang Qiao entered the meeting room, she’d very professionally put away the weekend movie she’d been looking forward to and gotten into work mode.

“How’s Zhou Huaijin now?” Luo Wenzhou asked.

“He’s locked up,” said Lang Qiao, “and he’s in a really bad mental state. He just stays curled up in his chair, clutching his head without saying anything. We’ve given him food and water, but he hasn’t touched them. So far he hasn’t consumed anything.”

“What about Dong Qian and Dong Xiaoqing?”

This time, Tao Ran responded. “Dong Qian was a quiet man, and he didn’t have many friends or family he was frequently in touch with. The people he was closest to were other truckers. And since his work and clients changed often, he didn’t always take the same route, so there was no pattern to the rest stops and restaurants he stopped at. But his coworkers all said the same thing… Haiyang, you discovered this. You talk about it.”

Being called on by name caught Xiao Haiyang off guard. He froze for a second, then sprang up automatically. “Yes, sir!”

Hands shot out on either side of him to yank him back into his chair. “*Sit down* and speak.”

Xiao Haiyang bowed his head and pushed his glasses up his nose awkwardly. “Dong Qian’s coworkers said that he often made online purchases. Delivery drivers were always looking for him. He might receive packages two or three times a week. I looked into the Dong family’s purchase history, and I noticed that over the past year, Dong Qian indeed made a number of online purchases. He also returned a lot of stuff…”

Luo Wenzhou looked up. “Get to the point. Do you think the delivery itself was the problem? Or was the seller the problem?”

“The delivery,” Xiao Haiyang said immediately. “Over eighty percent of the goods that Dong Qian returned were from the same delivery company—Kuaida. I looked them up. They command a very small market share; they’re slow and expensive, and their management isn’t standardized. Less than three percent of sellers use Kuaida, but over eighty percent of the packages Dong Qian received were from them. That can’t be a coincidence.”

Luo Wenzhou nodded. “Makes sense. Continue.”

“If the papers that the arsonist burned were important, then we wouldn’t have overlooked them during our repeated investigations. But what if they were still on the way while we were investigating? Making a delivery within the same city typically takes Kuaida three to five days. We would just have missed it.”

Luo Wenzhou’s expression darkened as he listened, and when he interjected, he used the other officer’s full name. “Xiao Haiyang, are you guessing, or do you have some sort of proof?”

Xiao Haiyang hesitated in the face of Luo Wenzhou’s intensity. “I…I do have proof…”

“Don’t play dumb,” Luo Wenzhou said, his tone growing serious. “Everyone’s in here. If you have something, then explain it. I know you’ve got the brain cells.”

To ensure that the item wouldn’t land in the police’s hands, the sender had chosen a company that would take a long time to deliver a package even within the same city. But were the police guaranteed to finish investigating within three to five days? What if the cops slacked off, and the

investigation dragged on for weeks? Would the package have ended up with the police?

Xiao Haiyang's words seemed reasonable, yet he was actually implying something serious: that there was a mole in the bureau.

Little Four-Eyes had a bad habit of being very indirect about what he meant. That might've been something he'd picked up at the Huashi District Bureau. Back when Luo Wenzhou and the others had investigated He Zhongyi's body, he'd pretended to be a young hothead who never thought twice about his words—and he'd hinted to them that the location where the body had been found might not have been the scene of the crime.

Now he was using that trick of false hotheadedness again.

"What evidence are you basing this speculation on?" asked Luo Wenzhou.

Xiao Haiyang looked down slowly through his glasses lenses, meeting his young boss's eyes. "I asked Kuaida to hand over all their recent tracking numbers, as well as the information they'd logged. I found that before Dong Qian died, a package addressed to and from himself was sent from his truck company to his home."

"You said 'a package addressed to and from himself,'" Fei Du interjected, "not 'he sent a package home from work.' That means that you don't think Dong Qian himself mailed that package, Officer Xiao."

"If Dong Qian really did mean to kill Zhou Junmao, he probably wanted to do it surreptitiously. That would have been why he chose to cause a car crash," said Xiao Haiyang. "That way, everyone would believe it was just an accident. So what could he have left behind for Dong Xiaoqing? The real identity of Zhou Junmao's killer, or a confession that he *was* the killer? I don't think either would make sense, unless he wanted his daughter to be in danger and in pain for the rest of her life."

"So what you really mean," responded Luo Wenzhou, "is that someone sent Dong Xiaoqing something that provoked her into killing Zhou Huaijin. Then, to prevent that thing from landing in police hands through her, they silenced her by killing her, then set fire to her home. Why?" he pressed Xiao Haiyang. "If this person was capable of killing Dong Xiaoqing in front of me, why didn't they kill Zhou Huaijin

themselves? Wouldn't a professional killer have had a better chance than a regular girl? And I don't understand the point of burning her home—was it purely to challenge the police?"

"That's what I think," Xiao Haiyang said without blinking. "Before we left, Dong Xiaoqing texted me saying that she had something to give me. But further investigation showed that the text was from an unknown party who'd stolen Dong Xiaoqing's number. Three days ago, when I went to the Dong home to investigate, I left my contact information on a piece of paper for Dong Xiaoqing. Looking at the time stamp on the text, I received it right when the arsonist was in the Dong home. The suspect must've seen my contact information in the home, then texted me to draw us there. They were, without question, trying to get our attention."

"Also," Tao Ran added from the side, "I looked into the delivery driver who normally brought packages to Dong Qian. After Dong Qian died, that driver went missing." He took out an evidence bag that contained a photocopy of an ID. The man in the ID photo had a buzz cut, but there was nothing special about his appearance. He could easily have vanished in a crowd. "This is the personal information the company had on the missing delivery driver. It's all fake. Management at Kuaida has been a mess for ages. They must just have glanced at his ID then let him start working without verifying it."

Luo Wenzhou glanced at Fei Du. "And what does our expert think?"

Fei Du closed his notebook, which was just for show anyway. "Someone killed Dong Xiaoqing at Heng'ai Hospital. While that was happening, someone else burned her home. And before that, a mysterious delivery driver was in contact with Dong Qian. That driver had a fake ID, which means he has some skills. In other words, up to three suspects are involved in this case, and they had a plan and technology. It's probably an organized group." He stood calmly, looking like a real scholar as he pulled down a whiteboard and drew a circle. "When it comes to groups, a single simple goal creates a more cohesive team—for instance, when everyone in the group stands to gain. On top of that, this kind of group will typically keep members loyal either through force or brainwashing—"

"Like that drug gang and Su Xiaolan's child-trafficking ring did," Tao Ran said.

“Right. Even international terrorist organizations operating under the banner of extremist beliefs have complicated financial backgrounds and chains of interest.” Fei Du chuckled. “It’s tough to unite a small group of people based purely on how twisted they all are inside. After all, being ‘abnormal’ is a highly individual experience. Take someone challenging the police as an example: Some people might do it because they want to test the cops’ intelligence, some might just want to kill them, some might want to have unspeakable relations with people in uniform…”

Everyone burst into laughter except Luo Wenzhou, who gave a dry cough to cut Fei Du off as he grew increasingly out of hand. At the same time, he reached out to grab Fei Du’s closed notebook and tuck it into the compartment beneath the table. “Enough nonsense! We’re in a meeting. Be serious!”

Fei Du obligingly moved on to a serious statement. “Such minute disagreements would destabilize a group, so they probably couldn’t form an organized unit and execute such a complicated plan. With that in mind, Officer Xiao, would the motive for all this just be to challenge the police? I don’t think that’s very realistic.”

“So your conclusion is…” Tao Ran prompted.

“Planning to kill Zhou Junmao, mailing something to Dong Xiaoqing, setting the fire and texting Officer Xiao—those things either weren’t done by the same group, or there was another reason for them all. It probably wasn’t just to get the police’s attention. But for the exact reason, we might need to speak to Zhou Huaijin.”

Xiao Haiyang was silent.

Fei Du glanced at him. “Actually,” he said, “Officer Xiao’s thought process is very interesting. If a suspect does something inexplicable, people usually assume they’re covering up something. Why are you so convinced they were just challenging the police?”

“Because Dong Qian is dead too,” Xiao Haiyang pointed out. “You guys assume that killing Dong Qian was part of the process of murdering Zhou Junmao. But what if Dong Qian was more of a victim? ‘The police can’t solve this case, so we’ll give the victim a chance to take their own revenge.’ Similar ‘vigilante justice’ cases have happened before—”

Xiao Haiyang suddenly snapped his mouth shut, realizing he'd said too much. Luo Wenzhou's and Fei Du's gazes landed on him simultaneously, and the entire meeting room fell silent.

Luo Wenzhou gave Xiao Haiyang a long, hard look. "Fei Du, come with me to see Zhou Huaijin. Tao Ran, try to use the info and photo on that fake ID to find this mysterious delivery guy. And keep going through the security cameras near Dong Xiaoqing's home to trace the arsonist. Chances are that they changed their appearance when they left the scene—so take note primarily of their height and innate physical characteristics. Meeting adjourned."

Fei Du looked down at where he'd just been sitting. He didn't see the notebook he'd had earlier, to his confusion. Then he heard someone say "Ha!" behind him. Luo Wenzhou had flipped open Fei Du's notebook and was now holding it open against his chest.

He'd flipped the notebook open to the page on which Fei Du had pretended to take notes, but had actually been doodling, bored.

The page contained a sketch of Luo Wenzhou sitting there, chin in his hand.

"Getting distracted during a meeting." Luo Wenzhou tapped Fei Du's shoulder and lowered his voice. "You're watered and fed, and your blood sugar isn't low anymore, is it? Unacceptable."

Fei Du hadn't particularly tried to hide the fact that he'd been sketching the picture, though. Unconcerned, he took the notebook back and flipped through it, then spread his hands. "Where's the one after this? Why are you ripping pages out of my notebook, Shixiong?"

"I'm confiscating it," Luo Wenzhou said self-righteously. Then he wiped the smile off his face and led Fei Du to the interrogation room.

***

ZHOU HUAIJIN LOOKED UP with dull eyes at Luo Wenzhou and Fei Du. It had been less than a day, but he'd gone from a talented, relatively

young man whose age was difficult to guess to a haggard, tired-looking, middle-aged figure. One's body was clearly just that delicate, regardless of gender. If a person's spirit disappeared, their "meat suit" would soon expire too.

Zhou Huaijin spoke before Luo Wenzhou said anything, asking hoarsely, "Can I see the paternity test?"

Luo Wenzhou paused, but then Fei Du handed a document over from behind him—apparently he'd known that Zhou Huaijin would ask this and had come prepared.

"Yours, Huaixin's, and Yang Bo's," Fei Du said. "They're all here."

Zhou Huaijin took a deep breath. It took him a minute just to open the envelope, as if it contained not just paper but the tragedy that was his life; his hands shook violently.

Fei Du toned down his slightly malicious attitude, bringing Zhou Huaijin a fresh cup of warm water. "Soothe your throat before you start speaking. Zhou-zong, you have your beliefs, right? You believe that people have souls. Huaixin still had attachments to this world, so he probably hasn't gone far. Don't let him see you too sad."

Gentle words like these were the surest way to summon tears from someone experiencing a huge amount of pain, and Zhou Huaijin couldn't hold back a sob. "I've said everything I can. What else do you want to know? The fake kidnappers' identities?"

"Hu Zhenyu already told us those details," said Luo Wenzhou. "I don't know whether you've heard, Mr. Zhou—your brother's murderer, Dong Xiaoqing, was killed in a car crash not long after she escaped the crime scene at Heng'ai Hospital."

Zhou Huaijin's expression froze for a moment. Then he said coldly, "Really? That was much better than she deserved."

"The person who killed her did it deliberately," Luo Wenzhou added, his eyes fixed intently on Zhou Huaijin's face.

Zhou Huaijin leaned back, both arms wrapped around his chest in a very defensive pose. "I really wish I could've been the one who did it."

“Zhou-zong,” Fei Du said, “Dong Xiaoqing was silenced immediately after she committed that murder. Someone was clearly afraid that she’d say something after the police caught her. Even if she killed your brother, she was just a knife. Don’t you want to know who wielded that knife?”

Zhou Huaijin’s face suddenly went tight.

“Dong Xiaoqing is undeniably dead now,” Fei Du continued. “It’s no use hating her or wanting to maim her. Even if you desecrated her corpse in revenge, she wouldn’t feel anything. Would you be happy with that?”

Fei Du had successfully provoked Zhou Huaijin. He turned his bloodshot eyes on Fei Du and stared at him for a long time, then asked, “What do you want?”

“There was one question I asked that you never answered,” said Fei Du. “Why haven’t you asked why Dong Xiaoqing wanted to kill you? Do you know something? Did you know *her*?”

“No,” said Zhou Huaijin. “I’d never seen her before. And I didn’t think she was suspicious, at least not in the moment when she approached, or I wouldn’t have permitted my bodyguards to let her through.”

Fei Du nodded. “That means you remembered something after.”

Zhou Huaijin must’ve been extremely thirsty, because he picked up the water Fei Du had brought him and drank it all in one go. “I’ve done some things I’m not proud of, but Huaixin was an innocent party in all this. If you guys can give him the justice he deserves, I won’t even care if we go bankrupt, whether I’m the real heir or not—you understand what I mean, Mr. Fei.”

Fei Du was very observant. Like a particularly sensitive chameleon, he immediately adjusted the patterns and rhythm of his speech to complement Zhou Huaijin’s attitude. “I do,” he said frankly. “When your company was in danger, I took advantage of it and made some money. It doesn’t seem like you mind, so I won’t apologize.”

Zhou Huaijin stared at the ceiling. The overhead light stabbed his pupils ruthlessly. He seemed to hesitate, like he didn’t know where to start. It was a while before he spoke.

“Have you guys come to a conclusion about whether the Zhou Group’s charity funds were money-laundering fronts?” he asked finally. “Even if you haven’t, please be very vigilant. I’m sure there are other points of suspicion. Unfortunately, they’re always on guard against me; they won’t let me touch anything related to that. I don’t have proof, but I know the company doesn’t consist of pure, devout people. They definitely didn’t only use legal means to make their fortune initially.”

“Are you alluding to the suspicion that Zhou Junmao killed Zhou Yahou?” Luo Wenzhou asked.

“Not just that.” Zhou Huaijin shook his head. “There’s more than that. ‘Someone who steals a hook is punished with death; someone who steals a country becomes a marquis.’[12] The Zhou Group’s headquarters are overseas, so a lot is hidden there. And after all these years of success and fame, plenty can’t be investigated anymore. I only remembered this after the shock of Dong Xiaoqing’s attempt on my life, but many years ago, the paths of my life and hers may have touched briefly… It had to do with Zheng Kaifeng.”

Luo Wenzhou signaled the police clerk to get ready.

“You guys probably already know what kind of background Zheng Kaifeng comes from,” Zhou Huaijin continued. “Years ago, he was a little criminal who worked under a snakehead gang.[13] Once he started working for Zhou Junmao and made it big, he started acting like a successful man wherever he went. But filth is filth. You can’t change what’s in your bones. Even now, he doesn’t know how to be polite and civilized.”

At the words “in your bones,” Fei Du’s eye twitched slightly, and the tip of his pen made a short line on the page.

Zhou Huaijin didn’t notice. He was completely immersed in his memories. “That had to be…twenty years ago. Huaixin had just been born, and my mother’s postpartum depression was getting more serious by the day. She was basically a lunatic no one could communicate with. She couldn’t care for Huaixin, so I moved his cot into my room and had him follow me around every day.”

Luo Wenzhou studied him. “I’ve heard that a baby crying through the night can make new parents lose it for the first several years. You certainly

were patient from a young age, Mr. Zhou. Surely your family could afford a nanny?"

"Not a lot of young men really love babies. I was just scared." Zhou Huaijin closed his eyes gently and took a deep breath, then extended his hand toward Luo Wenzhou. "Can I have a cigarette? Thanks. My mother's protection was the only reason I survived under Zhou Junmao's watch, but she was deteriorating rapidly day after day—both physically and mentally. That made me despair. Every day, when I looked at her, I saw my own imminent death. Huaixin was just what I clung to out of sheer desperation. We were almost inseparable back then. Sometimes I even mashed up some of my own food to feed him. I figured that no matter what Zhou Junmao wanted to do, he would have to consider his own biological child.

"Once, Huaixin wet himself in bed in the middle of the night and started crying. I groggily got up to change his diaper. But when I removed the soiled one, I realized that we didn't have any new ones, so I went to go get more from the storage room…and I saw that the light in the first-floor study was on. Zhou Junmao hadn't been home for several days, but now he was having a secret discussion with Zheng Kaifeng.

"At that point, the Zhou Group's main focus was East Asia. They wanted to seize the market and cheap labor while this country was encouraging foreign investments in local companies. Zheng Kaifeng himself was in charge of that. His luggage was at the door; he must've just gotten off the plane. If it weren't for Huaixin, I would've turned tail and run at the sight of them, but instead I had to walk silently past the study and sneak toward the storage room. That was when I heard Zheng Kaifeng saying 'completely dead, don't worry, there's absolutely no trace'—stuff like that."

Zhou Huaijin paused and reached up to massage his temples forcefully. He took another deep breath. "If you've lived in a state of constant fear for your life, you'll understand how you become incredibly sensitive to certain words. When I heard the word 'dead,' I couldn't even think about the context. My first thought was that they were planning to kill me. I was so scared I was frozen to the spot. Then I heard Zhou Junmao say, 'I saw the news. It seems like there was a slipup.' Zheng Kaifeng said, 'You mean that Dong guy? Don't worry about him. He doesn't know anything. He just stupidly got himself involved. That was just fate.' Zhou Junmao

laughed and said, ‘Anything you spend money on is worth it. If it saves us trouble, I don’t care if it’s expensive.’”

“Hold on,” said Luo Wenzhou suddenly. “Mr. Zhou, can you give me a specific time frame? When was this?”

That Zhou Huaijin could recall their conversation at all after twenty-odd years was a testament to how terrified he’d been; his fear had given him an adrenaline rush that enhanced his memory. Still, he had difficulty recalling any other details immediately. His brow knit in concentration.

Fei Du studied his weary face, then tapped the wooden tabletop with the cap of his pen. “Working and studying during the day, then coming home to care for a kid at night—that’s a level of stress even adults can’t handle, Zhou-zong, let alone a teenager. And you were still in school then, right? Did caring for him affect you? Were you tired in class?”

“It was all right. I didn’t have a heavy course load. Only my morning foundational courses were a bit…” Zhou Huaijin answered. At that point, it was like he managed to catch the tail of a distant memory. “Oh, right—business school. I was in business school then. I was seventeen. It was my first year.”

So this had happened twenty-one years ago.

“You said that the study door wasn’t closed that night,” Fei Du continued. “So it wouldn’t have been a cold winter night, nor a point in the summer when you’d need AC.”

“Right! It wasn’t hot or cold. It was probably September or October. Given my mom’s mental state, no one really walked around the house much after dark, and the household staff didn’t speak Chinese. That was why Zhou Junmao and Zheng Kaifeng didn’t bother to close the door to have their conversation.”

Luo Wenzhou exchanged a glance with Fei Du, then looked down to text Tao Ran. *Did anything happen with the Zhou or Dong families in September or October twenty-one years ago?*

Tao Ran’s voice very quickly sounded in his earpiece. “Yeah. I was just about to tell you. Dong Xiaoqing’s mother died in a car accident on September sixteenth that year.”

The corner of Luo Wenzhou's eye twitched. Zhou Junmao's deadly car crash had also been on September 16!

"At that point, I was too scared to stick around, and I ran. But I always remembered that. Back then, information wasn't as readily available—trying to find news from outside the country wasn't easy. But I found the luggage tag on Zheng Kaifeng's suitcase, and I figured out that the abbreviation for the city he'd traveled from was short for 'Yancheng,' so I asked a Chinese exchange student I trusted to look into news that mentioned 'Yancheng,' 'Dong,' or 'accident.'"

Luo Wenzhou looked down to scroll through some old newspapers that his colleagues outside had sent to his phone. "Did you find news about a famous entrepreneur dying in a car crash?"

"Yes. Three months later, the deceased's company was purchased by a foreign company. The funds came from a shell company that the Zhou Group had registered in the Cayman Islands." Zhou Huaijin spread his hands. "You see, a first-time murderer who isn't punished only gets more fearless the next time. You can get addicted to cheating. Two petty criminals had killed Zhou Yahou and become famous businessmen, successfully broaching the upper class. Then they killed another obstacle and successfully acquired that enemy's connections, which gave them at least ten years' worth of developmental advantages. Back then, this country's government encouraged foreign funding, but foreigners—given their lack of experience and on-the-ground knowledge—would never get the *really* good projects. Fei-zong, you're more or less familiar with how business works: Do you know how much capital you'd need to compete with local brands and gain connections in a completely unfamiliar market?"

Fei Du sighed. "Yes, and I know that it wouldn't be that expensive to find a truck driver who didn't want to live anymore. Your father really was the kind of guy who flipped the board if he couldn't win."

"That woman…that Dong woman." Zhou Huaijin covered his eyes with his hand, his voice weak. "When she did it, she said something. The only people who heard it were me and…and Huaixin."

"What did she say?" asked Luo Wenzhou.

"She said, 'One isn't enough. Why won't you guys let my dad go?'"

Luo Wenzhou furrowed his brow. “What’d she mean?”

“I don’t know. She seemed to think that I’d somehow taken advantage of that driver’s—her father’s—thirst for revenge and orchestrated Zhou Junmao’s car accident.” Zhou Huaijin shook his head. “But I really don’t have that kind of ability. If Zhou Junmao’s death really was a murder, I suggest you guys look into Zheng Kaifeng.”

Luo Wenzhou wrinkled his brow again as he suddenly remembered what Dong Xiaoqing had said to him before she died: “He’s one of them.”

If the death of Dong Xiaoqing’s mother hadn’t been an accident, but a planned conspiracy, then the driver had intended to die alongside their target—exactly the same as in Zhou Junmao’s death.

Had Dong Xiaoqing’s “them” referred to…a group of self-sacrificing hit men?

Luo Wenzhou stood up abruptly. “Summon Zheng Kaifeng for questioning.”

Watching the screen, Tao Ran furrowed his brow. “Wait. Dong Xiaoqing thought that Zhou Huaijin orchestrated this murder behind the scenes? I don’t get it. Why would she think that?”

“It depends on how much information was in that mysterious package,” replied Fei Du as he came out from the interrogation room. “Did she know that Zhou Huaijin orchestrated his own kidnapping, for example? Did she know that Yang Bo wasn’t Zhou Junmao’s bastard son? Or that Zheng Kaifeng and Zhou Junmao planned the car crash twenty years ago? When Zhou Huaixin called the police, he was fearlessly trumpeting a lot of nonsense, including that he believed someone had leaked Zhou Junmao’s whereabouts and car model, which involved Dong Qian in a rumor about rich influential families hiring hit men to kill each other. For his suicide mission to work, someone inside the company had to be in contact with him. Knowing all that, if you were Dong Xiaoqing, then in a moment of rage, who would you assume had arranged Zhou Junmao’s killing?”

“Also,” Lang Qiao interjected, “nobody in Zhou Huaijin’s family believed he was really his father’s son. Could someone have purposely misled them too? I mean, when Zhou Huaijin was young, his parents might just have been uncertain of his paternity. But if someone kept saying ‘That

kid looks like Lao-Wang from next door…'—after all, Zhou Huaijin really doesn't look like Zhou Junmao—and then a 'friend' told Zhou Junmao that a way to test paternity had been developed… A company that big obviously couldn't let that kind of scandal unfold, so they'd have to do the paternity test secretly. And if that 'friend' volunteered to help, it'd be just like how Zhou Huaijin sabotaged Yang Bo…"

She was interrupted when the phone started to ring. For some reason, a bad feeling came over her the moment she picked it up. "Hello?"

It was the officer in charge of tailing Zheng Kaifeng. "Xiao-Qiao-er! Tell the boss Zheng Kaifeng ran off!"

Lang Qiao's vision swam. "Bro, are you serious? How? When did you find out? There's so many of you—you couldn't keep track of one old man? Are you good?"

Luo Wenzhou took the phone from her hand.

The officer on the other end felt extremely sorry for himself. Up until this point, the focus of the Zhou Huaijin kidnapping investigation had been on Yang Bo, Hu Zhenyu, and Zhou Huaixin, although the police had also forbidden a few other key people to leave the country due to their inquiry into the Zhou Group's financials. They did have people keeping an eye on Zheng Kaifeng, but he hadn't been one of their main suspects, so his tail was a bit more lax. After all, whether the case came down to a will or to illegitimate children, the old man had nothing to do with it. If not for Dong Xiaoqing's assassination attempt, the police might've stopped tailing Zheng Kaifeng that very weekend.

"This morning, Zheng Kaifeng went to the Zhou Group building in the downtown core as usual," the officer reported. "We followed him for the whole day. We watched him come out of the building and get in his car in the parking lot, and we were following the car to his house when you said to summon him for questioning, Boss. The car hadn't even gone through the house gates before we stopped it. And then we discovered the old man in the car wasn't even him!"

"You didn't even notice the wrong man getting into the car. I don't know whether you realize this, but your eyes aren't for breathing or eating!" Luo Wenzhou was severely disappointed. "Bring in all of the lackeys of his who helped him fool you guys. Tao Ran, apply for a warrant and then take

some people with you to the Zhou building to request security footage. Look into Zheng Kaifeng's work, bank accounts, and residence. Something's definitely up with this guy, or else why would he run? Lang-er, you guys contact the transportation department and ask them to set up roadblocks on all the highways in and out of the city. Notify the airport, train stations, and long-distance bus stations. Tell them to keep an eye out for someone with Zheng Kaifeng's features. Get moving. We still have time. We can't let him get away!"

Lang Qiao had been looking forward to going home after Zhou Huaijin's questioning. If she took a taxi, she could still have made her evening movie. Now it looked like that was completely out of the question. She couldn't hold back her anguish. "Why are we so busy these days?! It's all because Mercury's in retrograde!"

Tao Ran thought she was talking about the case. "Retrograde?" he asked hastily.

"Mercury," said Lang Qiao, defeated. "Mercury is in retrograde."

Boomer-ish Deputy Tao was completely lost. He couldn't make heads or tails of this thieves' cant. "Doesn't Mercury spin west to east? Can it go the other way?"

"All right, Deputy Tao. We already know you don't have a girlfriend." Lang Qiao took a breath and patted Tao Ran's arm sympathetically. "I'm saying this is a weird year. Think about it. From the beginning of the year until now, how many overtime shifts have we pulled? We've worked harder each month of this year than all of last year combined. Cases just keep coming, and they're all serious. Either something's happened at a district bureau, or a serial kidnapping and murder case that goes back twenty years has come to light. Or, if it's not one of those, it's a rich family's dramatic dispute, and it whips the entire city into a frenzy. Bosses, comrades—is this still a calm, peaceful, international city? Why do I feel like I'm fighting on the front line in Syria?"

She was just venting, but Tao Ran's heart sank. Lang Qiao was right. This frequency wasn't normal.

Yes, big cities had too many people, and filth always found nooks and crannies to hide in. Still, chronic ills only managed to become chronic

and long-term by evolving a specific method of hidden survival. Perhaps a day would come when society improved so much that they were exposed… but could it happen so serendipitously, and all at once?

The last half year had been like a firecracker roll linked by a single fuse. With a single spark, everything was exploding to the surface. Tao Ran couldn't help but think of that mysterious Zero Degree Reading app again, and he couldn't resist stopping Luo Wenzhou, who was already at the door. "Hold on, Lao-Luo!"

Luo Wenzhou looked back.

"Do you remember how our shifu—"

Luo Wenzhou let out an exclamation of surprise and hurriedly interrupted him. "Right, right, right! It's almost the anniversary of Lao-Yang's death. If you hadn't reminded me, I might've forgotten. We need to wrap this case up ASAP so we can buy flowers and visit Shiniang soon!"

Tao Ran froze.

Luo Wenzhou gave him a meaningful look, then nudged Fei Du's shoulder. "If there aren't enough police cars, take your own. I'll reimburse you for the gas. If you don't want to do more overtime, hurry up!"

He rushed away with Fei Du.

Tao Ran was lost in thought until Xiao Haiyang's voice from behind disturbed him. "Deputy Tao, are we going to the Zhou Group building now?"

"Hm? Mm…yeah, let's go. Some of our colleagues from the financial crime department should still be around. I'll drive. You give them a call…"

When Luo Wenzhou interrupted him earlier, he'd deliberately said something wrong—something that only someone familiar with the subject would understand.

Their shiniang, Lao-Yang's widow, was a busy career woman. They weren't close with her when Lao-Yang was alive. Lao-Yang's death on the job had been a huge blow to her; she felt like her beloved's job had taken him away from her, and she was incredibly resistant to seeing his colleagues. Thus, Luo Wenzhou and the others tried not to bother her. Instead, every year, they discreetly went to Lao-Yang's grave to clean it and

pay their respects before the actual day of his death anniversary. During the Lunar New Year holidays, they would ask Lao-Yang's daughter, Yang Xin, to come meet them while she was on her winter break so they could give her some food and New Year's money in a red packet.

Moreover, they would never "buy flowers and visit Shiniang"—she was severely allergic to pollen. Yang Xin had told them that this past Lunar New Year, after Luo Wenzhou bought a bouquet on a whim. Outside the Yang family, only he and Tao Ran knew that.

Tao Ran frowned. What had Luo Wenzhou been trying to tell him with such a nonsensical line?

Chapter 14

"YOUR CAR'S TOO FLASHY," Luo Wenzhou said, closing the door of Fei Du's huge SUV. "You'd have a hard time squeezing into a parking lot that was even slightly full, not to mention your gas consumption—hey! Watch the gate."

Fei Du was obviously a good driver; he was the kind of person who'd taunt death by racing in the mountains, and in all these years, he hadn't gotten himself killed yet. The municipal bureau's gate was far too wide to pose a problem for him. Realizing what Luo Wenzhou was actually trying to tell him, though, Fei Du turned onto the road and then switched on his car radio. The signal was smooth and clear; nothing was amiss.

"The signal's not bad." Fei Du turned the radio down, then reached for an inconspicuous device under the dashboard. He used it to scan the car interior and, when it didn't find anything, he chuckled. "Relax. There are no cameras or spying devices. I switch cars every day anyway. Even I don't even know which one I'll drive on a given day."

Luo Wenzhou nodded wearily and stretched.

The police had happened to miss the mysterious package sent to the Dong home, and Xiao Haiyang had hinted that the sender was familiar with how the municipal bureau handled investigations—and, indeed, was likely to be someone from within the bureau itself. Luo Wenzhou's rebuke at the time had actually been a rejection of his hypothesis. After all, the police hadn't investigated the Dong family in secret. All the Dongs' neighbors had known when they came and left, to say nothing of anyone with malicious intent. If the delivery person really was one of the suspects involved, he would've found it very easy to avoid the police without any insider intel.

They couldn't assume Xiao Haiyang was right. These were Luo Wenzhou's coworkers, people he worked with day in and day out. He didn't want to suspect anyone unless he had good reason to.

But then Zheng Kaifeng escaped, and the timing was a little too suspicious.

Dong Xiaoqing had tried to kill Zhou Huaijin right around noon. The situation had been utter mayhem: Luo Wenzhou had focused entirely on catching the perpetrator, while Fei Du had been occupied with waiting outside Zhou Huaixin's operating room. No one had had the time or mental energy to spare to control the situation. On top of that, a lot of reporters had been present. Before the first wave of police even arrived, reports had appeared across various forms of media.

If Zheng Kaifeng had escaped right after seeing *that* on the news, he would still be a regular suspect.

But when the news of Dong Xiaoqing attempting to murder Zhou Huaijin broke, it clearly hadn't bothered him. He didn't think any of this would affect him, because twenty-one years ago, neither he nor Zhou Junmao had known that there was a terrified youth outside that study door.

So why had he suddenly run, panicked, after Zhou Huaijin revealed that twenty-one-year-old secret?

Who was acting as his ears on the inside? Who on the entire criminal investigation team…or even in the entire municipal bureau?

Fei Du suddenly spoke up. "Under these circumstances, common sense dictates that you shouldn't want to be in my car right now. After all, from multiple perspectives, I'm the likeliest mole."

Luo Wenzhou glanced at him.

"For one thing, I know Zheng Kaifeng," Fei Du continued. "And I'm more familiar with the Zhou Group than any of you." His hand rested casually on the steering wheel. "For another, the whole incident with the Zhou family happened after I started working with the bureau. Any logical analysis based on everyone's historical track record for trustworthiness would find the newest person to be the most suspicious."

Luo Wenzhou smiled noncommittally. "Do you really think your shixiong is the type of asshole who'd turn around and suspect the guy he'd just declared his love to?"

Fei Du paused.

Luo Wenzhou didn't wait for him to speak. "I know it's not you. Even though you act like you know how to cooperate with others, you're

actually very solitary," he continued. "Your only relationships are mutually beneficial, and they don't go any deeper than that mutual benefit. I really don't know what Zheng Kaifeng would have that'd outweigh my good looks."

Fei Du didn't know what to say. When he was trying to coax and charm, sweet words flowed easily from his mouth; he thought he was pretty good at coming up with them. But the compliments that Luo Wenzhou paid himself put Fei Du to shame.

Still, Fei Du had no choice but to agree with his boasts. "You're right," he said. "So are you inviting me to lust after your beauty, old man? Am I allowed to slack off a little and pull over to kiss you right now?"

"No. Not while I'm on duty," upright Sergeant Luo said, keeping work and play separate. "Also, I know you're thinking that the hunk next to you is a dumbass. You're only refraining from saying so because I'm hot."

Thanks to those noodles earlier in the day, Fei Du really didn't want to take a jab at him. He had nothing else to say, though, so he just kept quiet.

At last, Luo Wenzhou stopped joking around. "Actually, it's because of what you asked Zhou Huaijin in the interrogation room," he explained. "After his brother's accident, Zhou Huaijin didn't ask why Dong Xiaoqing did what she'd done. You immediately deduced that he knew something about her, but something he'd only remembered after the shock he went through. Otherwise, he wouldn't have let her get close in the first place. Hu Zhenyu is one of Zhou Huaijin's trusted men, Zhou Huaixin was his baby brother, and Yang Bo is a rival he'd been plotting against and keeping a close eye on recently. So if it had anything to do with one of those three, his reaction wouldn't have been so delayed."

Fei Du nodded. "Yes. This afternoon, in the hospital, I was thinking about whether Dong Xiaoqing might have anything to do with Zheng Kaifeng."

"Exactly," said Luo Wenzhou. "Given your intelligence, if Zheng Kaifeng *was* working with you, he wouldn't have had to wait this long for a warning."

That sounded reasonable. Fei Du accepted it readily. “Yeah. It’s a bit late to run now.” If Zheng Kaifeng had fled right after Dong Xiaoqing’s attack, he might have left Yancheng safely by now.

Luo Wenzhou sighed. “Fei Du, what would you do if I told you that I’d actually trusted you without reason—without logic?”

Fei Du froze. Then his eyes curved in a sly look, and he deliberately lowered his voice. “I’d be very touched and get down on one knee.”

“Shut up.” Luo Wenzhou leaned back. “You’d think I was either stupid or bullshitting.”

Fei Du smiled and didn’t disagree.

“Remember Wang Xiujuan? He Zhongyi’s mom? If she were sitting here, you could hold a knife to her chest and she wouldn’t even think you were trying to murder her. Would you think *her* trust in you was stupid?”

“It’s not polite to talk about a woman’s intellect behind her back, Shixiong,” Fei Du replied evasively. “Besides, I only met her by chance. She doesn’t know me.”

“I’ve known you for over seven years,” said Luo Wenzhou. “I know you, and I also choose to trust you. Of course, if you let me down one day, I’ll be very sad. And once I’m sad, I might not love you anymore.”

Fei Du should’ve teased him back, but he suddenly felt something invisible spreading toward him from Luo Wenzhou. It pressed down on his chest, rendering him speechless.

His lack of response made things awkward. Luckily, Luo Wenzhou’s tone changed right away. “Oh, yeah—when I assigned everyone’s tasks earlier, I didn’t tell you where we’d be going. So how come it seems like you know?”

Fei Du let out a secret sigh of relief and chuckled. “You told the team to make arrests, conduct searches, review security footage, and find evidence—they’re all busy running around. But you never mentioned Yang Bo, Zheng Kaifeng’s mentee. It seemed like you forgot about him, but it’s actually that you suspect there’s a mole on the team and you didn’t want to alert them, right? We’re less than two miles from the hotel where Yang Bo is staying. We’ll be there soon.”

Luo Wenzhou suspected that spending so much time with Fei Du would eventually make him lazy. The man was scarily smart, and he didn't need things to be said aloud. Who knew how many words Fei Du was saving him?

After a pause, Luo Wenzhou said, "Dong Xiaoqing actually said something to me before she died."

The huge, luxurious SUV was like a black monster moving through the darkness. As Fei Du held the massive beast's leash, his eyeballs turned toward Luo Wenzhou.

"She said Dong Qian wasn't innocent. That he was 'one of them.'"

Fei Du's eyelids had been lowered; now his eyes snapped open.

"You think it's suspicious too, right?" Luo Wenzhou asked lightly. "I've been trying to figure out who 'them' is. Definitely not Zhou Huaijin and the others. Even if Zhou Huaijin was right that Dong Xiaoqing believed one of them used Dong Qian's hatred to convince him to sacrifice his life to kill Zhou Junmao in a car crash, she still wouldn't have thought Dong Qian was 'one of' those people."

"You're suggesting that there's a gang of killers who specialize in masking murders as car accidents," said Fei Du. "And that they even sacrifice themselves if necessary, like suicide bombers."

"It does seem far-fetched, but that's the only way I can explain it. I didn't mention this earlier because I didn't understand what Dong Xiaoqing meant, and I was afraid my theory would affect your judgment… What're you laughing at?"

Fei Du floored it. His car—which usually drove smoothly—lurched forward. "Sure. That would explain everything."

"Careful." Luo Wenzhou grabbed the handle next to him. "This isn't how you rock a car, young man."

"I asked a few friends to quietly look into Yang Bo," Fei Du continued. "His father died more than ten years ago. He was drinking and driving, and he hit someone else. Both drivers died at the scene."

Luo Wenzhou sat up straighter.

Yang Bo received an average education, and he wasn't particularly talented. His family background was nothing out of the ordinary. Apart from being a little sly and slightly handsome, nothing about him stood out. So how did he reach his position in the Zhou Group at such a young age?

In most cases, there would only be two potential answers: The man in question was either a "crown prince" or a "favored concubine." But Yang Bo was neither.

"Who was the victim in his father's accident?" Luo Wenzhou asked immediately. "Were they related to the Zhous in any way?"

"That's the biggest mystery," said Fei Du. "He hit a seven-seat commercial vehicle. Including the driver, there were five people inside. Four died, and one was injured. This happened in a prefecture-level city in T— Province. The people in the car were all white-collar workers at a local real-estate investment firm. On the day of the accident, they'd gone to the local government to submit their proposal for a project taking bids. The Zhou Group wasn't bidding on the project, and none of the victims had connections to the Zhou Group either privately or professionally."

There were no personal grudges, then. The only angle they could consider was whom the situation would benefit. Luo Wenzhou fell silent, then asked, "Who got the project in the end?"

"Since the whole team got into that accident, their company gave up on the opportunity. In the end, the project went to a small unknown company. You wouldn't be familiar with its name if I told you." Fei Du paused. "That said, I do have a piece of very useful information for you. If you're willing to give me something in exchange."

From those words, Luo Wenzhou could tell that this troublemaker next to him—who'd behaved for a short while—was back on his bullshit. "I could find whatever you found, even if it takes me a bit longer. But sure, I'll at least listen to your unreasonable demand. Go ahead."

"You need to answer a question." Fei Du paused, then clarified, "Of course, it's a personal question."

Luo Wenzhou raised his eyebrows. *Am I the kind of person who'd sell my personal privacy for work?* he scoffed internally. The answer was obvious; he decided in three seconds flat.

“Deal,” he said definitively.

“If you go look into that little real-estate company’s books, you’ll find they have very large debts, with company shares as collateral. If they don’t repay those debts on time, their company shares will go to their creditor. So they basically have an invisible shareholder, which happens to be called Bright Foundation.” Fei Du turned onto a side road. Yang Bo’s hotel was right in front of them. “Does that name ring any bells?”

Luo Wenzhou’s brows knit tightly together. The name did sound vaguely familiar, but he came across so much information in his daily life that it was difficult to tell where he’d heard it.

Fei Du drove onto the hotel property with ease. His car was so ostentatious that its logo distracted everyone who saw it. In a way, that helped them stay unnoticed.

Luo Wenzhou searched “Bright Foundation” on his phone, but not much came up. The company probably didn’t like to advertise themselves. All Luo Wenzhou found was a company website, and its design didn’t stand out. He quickly scrolled past the lengthy introduction to their corporate culture and saw their logo.

Then he looked up abruptly.

Fei Du decelerated and said in a leisurely tone, “Remember now? That place by the sea where Xu Wenchao dumped the bodies—the Bright Foundation has the property rights to it. Kind of a big coincidence, wouldn’t you say?”

Luo Wenzhou digested this for a while. “Babe,” he finally said in a low voice, “what you’re implying is a little unnerving.”

“Is it? I don’t think so,” said Fei Du. “Let’s say that vehicular-manslaughter suicide squad exists. If they specialize in manufacturing car crashes to kill people, then it wouldn’t be a huge stretch for them to have a ‘graveyard’ they could rent out to other murderers, right?”

Then…how did Yang Bo, with his suspicious birth and his involvement with the shady Zhou family, factor into all this?

“I really want you to make good on answering my question now,” Fei Du said suddenly, “but…I get the sense that something’s wrong with the car

next to us.”

Following his gaze, Luo Wenzhou saw a truck with a huge fresh-food logo at three o’clock. It silently circled the hotel a few times, then finally drove into the underground parking garage.

“Most managerial staff are off work by now. Who’d be around to accept a delivery at this hour? Lots of ingredients can’t be left out overnight,” Fei Du said quietly. “And if memory serves, that high-end refrigerated transport chain is part of the Zhou Group.”

Luo Wenzhou’s gaze hardened. “Follow it.”

Maintaining a certain distance, Fei Du very carefully drove into the garage from the other side. The security guard on duty hurried over to stop them. “Sorry, this is the exit. You need to…”

The car window rolled down slowly, and a police badge appeared through it.

The security guard froze. He watched a long-haired man lean over from the driver’s seat and wink at him, smiling slightly. The man brought his index finger to his lips. “Shhh.”

***

YANG BO, UNLIKE ZHENG KAIFENG, was a serious suspect in the Zhou Huaijin kidnapping case. At the hotel where he was staying, the lobby, surrounding area, and even other spaces within the building itself were full of people tailing him; that way, the police could find him at any moment if they needed to question him.

For days, Yang Bo had been harassed by the police, media, and even his own mind. He was having trouble eating and sleeping. Whenever his eyes closed, he thought about that paternity test. It had once filled him with mixed emotions; now he wished it had never existed at all. He still clearly remembered how he’d felt when he first received those test results. His first reaction had been disbelief—he couldn’t imagine his mother just betraying their family like that. But after that shock passed, he couldn’t contain his

glee. He thought he'd become the tragic prince in a story. Even his organs felt like they were made of something different now. For several days, he'd seemed to float when he walked.

He—Yang Bo, a regular man born to a regular family—was Zhou Junmao's son and Zheng Kaifeng's mentee. The Zhou Group's two leaders were both taking good care of him. Wasn't he only a single step from touching the heavens?

Life was unpredictable, though. Yang Bo still had no idea how things had progressed to this point. And now that mad dog Zhou Huaixin, who'd barked in his face every day, was dead too—before Yang Bo had even recovered from the series of blows he'd been dealt.

Yang Bo fell heavily down onto his hotel bed, covering his face with both hands. He could feel the stubble he hadn't yet had a chance to shave. Opening his phone's sent messages, he saw a screen full of blood—the photos of Zhou Huaixin's murder hadn't even been censored online.

Yang Bo figured that he should be happy, but for some reason, he felt only panic and disgust.

At that moment, his phone buzzed. An unknown number was calling; he picked up wearily. "Hello?"

Zheng Kaifeng's familiar voice came through the phone. "It's me. Are you still at the Xianggong Hotel?"

Detecting tension in his tone, Yang Bo immediately sat up. "I am. Zheng-lao, do you—"

Zheng Kaifeng hastily interrupted him. "Come down. Shake your police tail. Find me in the underground parking lot. I'll send you my license plate number."

"I—"

But before the baffled Yang Bo got a word in, the other man hung up. Yang Bo was frozen for a moment; he didn't understand what was going on. He felt a bit lost. Quickly, however, his phone received a few messages—first a license plate number, then a few photos.

A message accompanied the latter. *These are the cops following you. Be careful!*

Yang Bo broke out in a cold sweat, and his hands trembled a little. Forcing himself to calm down, he changed into some workout clothes, grabbed his phone and wallet, and headed out, pretending he planned to hit the hotel gym for a nighttime run.

As soon as he opened the door of his room, he saw a male hotel worker standing outside it with his hand raised to knock. The worker smiled and greeted him, betraying no feelings of awkwardness. “Are you going to work out, sir? Will you need room service later?”

Yang Bo dragged his eyes over the man’s face, and a chill crept up his spine. This was one of the police officers in the photo!

He shook his head stiffly, his face pale. “No thanks.” Just saying those words used up nearly all his energy; he unconsciously lowered his head as he moved to lock the door and leave.

The “hotel worker” spoke up again. “Wait, sir.”

Yang Bo’s spine was stiff and straight. He almost stopped breathing.

“Don’t forget your room card,” the disguised officer said gently.

Yang Bo’s heart was about to pound clear out of his chest. He grabbed the card and walked away without turning around, his back drenched in cold sweat.

The “worker” watched him leave, then narrowed his eyes. “Something’s up with the monkey,” he murmured into his walkie-talkie. “He might be trying to run. Everyone be vigilant.”

As he finished speaking, a familiar male voice came from his earpiece. “Got it. Someone’s waiting for him in that underground parking lot. Get me live security footage from Xianggong Hotel’s underground parking. Everyone not doing that, help me block its entrances and exits. Let’s get ready to shoot the fish in the barrel.”

After a moment’s shock, the “worker” caught on. “Boss? I mean, yes sir!”

Driving into the parking garage through its exit, Fei Du silently used his car to block the ramp leading outside. Meanwhile, live camera footage was quickly delivered to Luo Wenzhou’s phone. Two men got out of the truck that had just entered. They wore delivery uniforms, but they had no

acting skills to speak of. Both men were tall, fit, and worked incredibly quickly. With alert gazes, they checked that all of the nearby cars were empty the moment they got out of the truck.

"Sergeant Luo," said a voice in Luo Wenzhou's ear. It belonged to another officer tasked with tracking Yang Bo. "Yang Bo just entered the gym. He walked around a bit, then went to the bathroom. I waited for five minutes outside and then broke into the bathroom, pretending to be a cleaner, but he'd already escaped through the window. He avoided my gaze from the moment he saw me, Sergeant Luo. I suspect that he might have known who I was."

Luo Wenzhou wasn't surprised at all. "Acknowledged," he said. Then he cut the connection with his colleagues and turned to Fei Du. "Yang Bo's coming down. I've called him to the bureau for questioning several times recently, and my people have been following him for an entire week. The idiot didn't notice for that long, and now suddenly he's growing brain cells? Someone must just have leaked him all the details of the officers tailing him."

No sooner had Luo Wenzhou finished speaking than a figure popped up in the security footage. It was Yang Bo, still in his workout gear. He stood staring in shock at the two men dressed as delivery workers, repeatedly wiping sweat from his face.

At that point, the refrigerated truck opened. The camera didn't catch what was inside, but Yang Bo's body language abruptly changed. His manner obsequious, he said something in the truck's direction.

Fei Du paused, surprised. "Zheng Kaifeng's in that truck."

The person in the truck said something, and Yang Bo's expression changed. He looked like a student who'd forgotten his backpack at home. He glanced around, and the two burly men in delivery-worker uniforms flanked and grabbed him, ready to stuff him into the truck.

There was no time to wonder why Zheng Kaifeng would have risked coming to get Yang Bo himself. "Arrest them!" Luo Wenzhou commanded the officers blocking the parking garage's entrances and exits. "Move now!"

Police sirens erupted, shooting through the entire garage like tidal waves. The people around the truck panicked. The fake delivery workers

tossed Yang Bo into the vehicle, jumped into the front, and floored it without even closing the doors properly. The innocent cars parked nearby suffered sudden undeserved damage as the truck scraped past them callously, pushing them into each other.

The truck driver quickly determined the direction of the police sirens and prepared to fly through the only quiet exit. Luo Wenzhou leaned over Fei Du suddenly to pull his seat belt on for him. “Stop that truck!”

This was the first time Fei Du had come onto the field with them, and he was doing well. He didn’t panic. He even responded with a “Yes, Sergeant.”

The truck driver clearly hadn’t anticipated a vehicle coming in the wrong way. Moreover, that SUV seemed not to have any intention of avoiding the truck—it shot directly at it. The truck driver swore and instinctively swerved, just barely avoiding the oncoming vehicle. Then, before he could even take a breath, there came a huge bang from the side. The oncoming SUV had accelerated to an incredible speed in a very short time; it seemed to have skillfully teleported to the truck and smashed it into the parking-garage wall.

The truck’s windows shattered completely. One door was severely deformed, and the wheels on one side were raised high in the air. The truck container opened with a clang; Yang Bo darted out clutching his head, accompanied by several men who looked like thugs.

Fei Du sat in his newly reinforced car. He was unhurt, but his seat belt had nearly choked him. “Shixiong,” he coughed, “I’m not getting involved in any fighting…”

“I wouldn’t dare send you into a fight.” As Luo Wenzhou pushed open the car door, the police cars that had raced to block the entrances and exits arrived. They encircled the pitiful truck completely, and within moments, the officers had driven the thugs back.

Luo Wenzhou pulled out a pair of handcuffs, looking past the panicked Yang Bo—who still had his head in his hands—into the interior of the truck. It was furnished very comfortably, with a thick layer of carpet on the floor and a few real leather armchairs. Zheng Kaifeng sat there, his face dark. He looked like a shar-pei that had conquered the world.

Luo Wenzhou knocked the stainless-steel cuffs against the truck door. “This way, please, Zheng-zong.”

Having been strangled a little by his seat belt, Fei Du tripped carelessly over some debris as he stumbled out of his car. “How brutal,” he murmured, watching the officers deal with the thugs.

He shook his head, then bent over and coughed a few times, one hand pressed to his chest. As he did so, he noticed a flash of light from something under the truck. It was so faint that the light was only visible—just barely—when it reflected on Luo Wenzhou’s light-colored pants. As Fei Du watched, the flashing grew quicker, until it almost blended with the flashing police lights…

Fei Du froze. His pupils constricted. Then he threw himself at Luo Wenzhou, grabbing his waist and shoving him backward.

Luo Wenzhou’s back was injured to begin with; when Fei Du tackled him like that, he lost his balance. But before he could reach out to grab something—anything—an earsplitting sound reverberated near his ear…

Chapter 15

WOULD FEARLESS, GREEDY, cruel Zheng Kaifeng choose death for himself?

On the other hand, if this was an attempt at murder, who'd planted that bomb on the truck?

If the would-be murderer was able to place a bomb without anyone noticing, why hadn't they chosen an easier method? They could just stab Zheng Kaifeng unexpectedly, or crash into him in a stolen car. Why were murderers suddenly incapable of staying in their lane these days, instead insisting on creating big news stories?

Any one of these questions would be worth thinking over at length.

But the mysterious, spinning black hole Fei Du's brain always seemed to contain had exploded, spitting out all his thoughts; without any gravitational pull on each other, they floated freely outside the boundaries of logic.

Maybe the flashes he'd seen against Luo Wenzhou's pants had just been overlapping light and shadow from the many police cars. Or maybe the danger he'd sensed in that split second had just been his own paranoia… And honestly, if someone really did want to blow up Zheng Kaifeng and the others, why would they use an incredibly visible diode tube?

To warn bystanders to back away?

If Fei Du was making a mistake, Luo Wenzhou could laugh about it for the rest of his life.

In that moment, though, Fei Du didn't have time to consider any of this. He just followed his most basic instincts—and not for any reason.

Luo Wenzhou had been knocking on the truck door, swaggering and showing off for Zheng Kaifeng, when Fei Du knocked him unexpectedly into the SUV. Fei Du grabbed the door handle and yanked it without looking, and before Luo Wenzhou could regain his footing, Fei Du stuffed him inside the vehicle.

Then Fei Du suddenly saw a spark fly from beneath the truck. He only managed to half close the door he was holding; he didn't have time to shield himself fully behind it before a huge shock wave reached over and slammed the door into his back.

After his car accident, Fei Du had fortified his entire SUV and changed out its windows. This had been his first time driving the vehicle after those upgrades. It *was* quite solidly reinforced against crashes now. He just hadn't expected to come across a bomb.

However well-fortified a car was, it wasn't a tank, and the car door hadn't been up to that challenge. It warped instantly in the explosion, and its bulletproof glass also met an unfortunate end. Fei Du's last thought was that his arm hurt as if the entire thing had been shattered by the door's impact, from the shoulder down.

All the car alarms in the parking garage started screaming at the same time. The sounds bounced off the ceiling and reverberated through the cramped space. A raging fire stuck out its sinister tongue to swallow the truck's entire container in an instant. Shards of an unknown car's shattered window fell to the ground like raindrops, and one of the container doors landed several yards away.

Fate and fortune were as fickle as the wind; they changed at the drop of a hat. In only a week, Zheng-lao had gone from "famous Chinese-diaspora entrepreneur" to "criminal suspect" to "roasted duck."

After that haphazard shove from Fei Du, Luo Wenzhou's head had banged against the steering wheel. For an instant, he thought he'd lost his hearing. Operating on instinct, he caught the man who landed in his arms; still, he couldn't tell what had happened for a moment. The cacophony in his ears gave way to a long and reedy ringing, high-pitched like a mosquito's buzz, and Luo Wenzhou felt something sticky on his hands.

Then, the smells of blood, smoke, and something burning flooded his senses.

"Fei Du…"

Luo Wenzhou's heart stopped for a moment before coming back online. It trembled at first, then started beating erratically. It felt like it might overload and explode.

“Fei Du!”

***

FEI DU’S CONSCIOUSNESS seemed to drift around him; he tuned in and out like an old radio that was rusty from disuse.

He heard broken yelling and someone calling his name, but he didn’t want to pay them any attention. In fact, he thought they were being too noisy.

Someone pried his eyes open, and he saw the light. You could supposedly regain consciousness by chasing after that light, but Fei Du wasn’t all that interested. He just looked to the side indifferently. As the faint illumination drifted further and further away, the infinite darkness behind him swallowed him up. He heard a loud bang somewhere, like a door slamming shut.

Fei Du’s faint consciousness sank somewhere even deeper. Down there, he didn’t care about money or intelligence, and he wasn’t conscious of his image. He didn’t even wear the mask he’d carefully crafted for himself over the years. He seemed to have gone back to being a young boy.

His legs were short now, and he really wanted to run around. But he’d only taken one step when inexplicable fear flooded his heart. A man who looked like a huge shadow towered over him. He stared down at Fei Du with ice-cold eyes.

“Only dogs like to run around,” the man said very gently. “Fei Du, are you a little dog?”

Fei Du was pulled along, barely understanding what was going on. His eyes landed on a little puppy. It might’ve been a newborn; it was smaller than a human palm, with teary eyes. The puppy ran over to Fei Du unsteadily. Fei Du extended his hand, and the puppy reached for it, standing on its hind legs to stretch out its clumsy, round front paws. It sniffed carefully around Fei Du’s freezing palm.

A soft gentleness bloomed inexplicably in Fei Du's heart as he rubbed the puppy's furry little head. The mild yet cold voice of the man next to him sighed. "This child's blood isn't healthy. We'll need to correct that."

The little puppy yelped as that pair of hands took it away roughly. The warmth in Fei Du's own hands had suddenly vanished.

Then a series of icy metal rings descended from the sky to wrap around his fingers and neck. The rings on his fingers connected to a thin wire that wound through a complicated contraption. Attached to the other end of the wire was the choke collar around his neck. If the wire's tension lessened by a hairsbreadth, the collar tightened by an inch. If the wire went completely slack, the collar would strangle him.

Fei Du couldn't breathe. He instinctively reached out as far as he could, closing his hands tightly into fists to help him pull the wire as taut as possible. Doing that loosened the collar around his neck slightly. Air flooded into his lungs, and he started coughing violently.

"You have to learn to breathe slowly." The man smiled, satisfied. "Smart. Looks like you've already learned how to keep yourself from being choked without needing to be taught."

The scene changed again. Fei Du was strapped to a chair; only his fingers, encircled by the rings, could move. The pain of suffocation loomed like a dark cloud over him. He was cold all over.

The man strolled over, humming a tune and holding a puppy in one hand. He placed it in Fei Du's palm. "Is it soft?" he asked.

Children and animals always made fast friends effortlessly. Smelling the boy's icy fear, the puppy did its best to nudge him with its warm head and lick his fingers.

The man smiled again. "Is it cute?"

Fei Du hesitated for a moment but ultimately nodded.

Terrifying pain descended on him with no warning. The collar suddenly tightened around his neck. He still felt the softness between his fingers—but the metal ring squeezed tightly around his throat. Fei Du

automatically pressed his fingers together, trying to pull the wire that eased his pain taut.

As lifesaving oxygen entered his tortured esophagus, the little puppy let out pitiful yelps. Fei Du suddenly realized that he was squeezing the puppy's delicate little neck. He released it in a panic, but that made the collar tighten around his own neck even more forcefully.

Fei Du struggled. The metal rings and the ropes around his body were like demonic living vines, strangling his flesh.

"Kill it, Fei Du. Kill her. Or you'll be the one to die."

***

TAO RAN PACED OUTSIDE the ICU room, his forehead covered in sweat, holding his phone to his ear.

"Zheng Kaifeng and Yang Bo died at the scene," his colleague said rapidly. "Everyone else had already been arrested, so they were spread out near the police cars and were more or less protected when the explosion occurred. A few people suffered minor injuries. One guy had the bad luck to be hit by a flying truck door, but everyone else is okay. The only people near the explosion when it went off were the boss and…"

Tao Ran's colleague kept talking, but Tao Ran didn't hear any of what they said, because someone who might have been a nurse poked her head out of the ICU. "Um… That patient who just came in…Fei Du? Where's his family…?"

Tao Ran hung up immediately. "I-I-I'm here…"

"You're his family?"

The nurse's question made Tao Ran freeze for a moment. He realized, suddenly, that Fei Du didn't have any family. One member of his immediate family had turned to ashes seven years ago, and the other was comatose. Fei Du lived a life of excitement, but he was ultimately just a lonely person with no ties whatsoever.

To the nurse, though, it had just been a casual question. She paid no attention to Tao Ran's hesitation. "Just now," she told him quickly, "the patient's breathing and heartbeat suddenly stopped. We don't know why. We're trying to resuscitate him now. You guys should be prepared."

Tao Ran felt like a cold gust had blown from his chest up to his skull. "What?!"

Now that she'd notified him, the nurse's task was complete. She hurried back into the ICU. Every second counted; she didn't have time to console the patient's family. Tao Ran instinctively chased after her for a few steps, but then he saw the NO ENTRY sign and could only stop helplessly.

That was when he realized that the nurse had said "you guys." Spinning around, he saw Luo Wenzhou standing behind him.

Luo Wenzhou had fractured a bone in his lower leg. After the second blow to his waist and lower back in one day, he now had a back brace. He'd also suffered a concussion from hitting his head on the steering wheel. Taken in from head to toe, he looked freshly mummified. He still felt dizzy too, and had to support himself by leaning against the wall, dragging his crutches when he moved.

Tao Ran didn't know how Luo Wenzhou had even managed to hop over from his room. He rushed over to help him sit down. "Your IV finished that fast?"

"I pulled it out," Luo Wenzhou said expressionlessly. "I won't die."

The sudden explosion on this cursed Friday night had sent the municipal bureau into a frenzy. There weren't enough hands to handle all the work. Tao Ran was running between the emergency room, the orthopedic unit, and the ICU; he could barely stay on top of everyone's status. Sweat poured down his back. "What use are you here? You're not a doctor, and we're not allowed to visit. If your wounds get infected, you'll be even more trouble. Go back!"

The hospital was full of the weird smells of different medications all mixed together. It was bitter and foul; you didn't want to breathe in too deeply. Every footstep, every word spoken, every vibrating phone was torture to Luo Wenzhou's concussed brain—it was like the sound waves assaulted him physically, striking his temples again and again. It made him

so dizzy he wanted to throw up. Remaining silent, he closed his eyes and leaned back into the cold, hard chair.

"Leave," said Tao Ran. "Don't add to the trouble here. Get up—I'll carry you back."

Pushing him away, Luo Wenzhou shook his head slightly. "Everyone else who gets wheeled in has someone waiting outside for them. If he doesn't have anyone, I'm afraid he'll be so sad he won't want to come back."

Luo Wenzhou's voice was very weak. Tao Ran had to strain to hear him—and he really couldn't reconcile that heartless scoundrel Fei Du with the word "sad." Suspecting that Luo Wenzhou had hit his head so hard that he was now speaking nonsense, he replied, "If he had the wherewithal to know who was or wasn't waiting for him outside, he wouldn't need to be in there. Get going. I'll wait here—or am I not 'someone'?"

Luo Wenzhou didn't have the energy to explain further to Tao Ran. He just said, nearly inaudibly, "It's not the same."

Friends were chance acquaintances; they came together and separated as they pleased. Friendship might be forever, but the friends themselves would come and go. At the end of the day, none of the others meant enough to Fei Du that he truly cared about them—they were all outsiders. Of course, Luo Wenzhou wouldn't presume to think of himself as Fei Du's family.

He was just a moth witnessing a distant flame; at first, it had been that almost imperceptible attraction that made him flap his wings hesitantly, flying over land and sea to get close to Fei Du, not reaching him until after several twists and turns.

He'd only just glimpsed the patterns on the lampshade, only just reached out to touch that peculiarly colored fire…

It took Tao Ran a full thirty seconds to realize that Luo Wenzhou's words contained a deeper meaning, and he wore a baffled expression for a while. Then his ringing phone pulled him back to reality. "Lao-Luo, are… are you okay?" he stammered, not knowing what else to say.

Luo Wenzhou flapped a hand at him, his face emotionless. "Answer the phone."

The call was from Lang Qiao, so it was clearly urgent; Tao Ran had to pick up. Thus, he could only stand and walk around a far corner, though he turned back every few steps to glance at Luo Wenzhou.

“All the suspects arrested from that truck have confessed, Deputy Tao. They’re Zheng Kaifeng’s privately hired thugs, and their salaries all trace back to the account of some mysterious foreign company. Our colleagues in financial crime are planning to follow that lead and investigate that shell company thoroughly. Also, we saw in Yang Bo’s call logs that he and Zheng Kaifeng talked on the phone just before they died. Zheng Kaifeng sent him a few photos. They’re all of the officers sent to tail Yang Bo.”

A fall breeze blew past the sweaty Tao Ran and pierced him straight through with its chill. “Got it.”

Lang Qiao fell silent for a while, then inquired, “How are the boss and Fei-zong?”

Peeking out from around the corner, Tao Ran saw Luo Wenzhou sitting there stiffly, covered in bandages and wearing a back brace. He looked like he’d fused to the chair. “Don’t worry. They’re…”

Before the word “okay” could exit his mouth, he saw Luo Wenzhou suddenly drop the crutches he held and press his elbows to his knees, then lean forward and cradle his head in his hands.

Was Sergeant Luo…crying?

Tao Ran stood frozen by the corner, blocking the path of some hospital workers pushing a bed. They called out impatiently for him to move, and he backed up against the wall, feeling as if he was waking up from a dream.

“…Deputy Tao…? Hello? Deputy Tao, are you still there?”

While lost in thought, he hadn’t heard a word that Lang Qiao said. He ducked his head quickly and rubbed his nose. “Uh, yes. Was there anything else?”

Lang Qiao lowered her voice. “All these things that happened over the last little while—first Zhou Junmao’s accident, then Zhou Huaijin’s kidnapping and Zhou Huaixin’s murder, now Zheng Kaifeng and Yang Bo

getting randomly blown up… These people aren't just regular citizens. Deputy Tao, you'd better be prepared. Deputy Director General Lu rushed over here as soon as he got word about this, and before he could even sit down, the phone rang and he got called away."

Tao Ran furrowed his brow. "What do you mean?"

Lang Qiao sighed. "I'll just say it outright. The Zhou Group's invested a lot in China in recent years, and they have even deeper connections overseas. They've been trying to stop our investigation into their company for a while. Now they're using Zheng Kaifeng's death and claiming that Zhou Huaijin and Hu Zhenyu are being illegally detained to stir things up in the foreign news. People overseas think that the government is targeting the Zhou Group underhandedly. We just got urgent orders for the boss to report everything that occurred today, in writing, and also to write a reflection letter. And until the internal investigation is over, everyone in charge…has been suspended."

Tao Ran leaned against the mottled white hospital wall, indifferent to the paint dust he rubbed all over his back by doing so. He paused for a second. "I didn't catch that, Xiao-Qiao. Can you repeat it?"

Lang Qiao noticed that his tone was strange. She remained silent.

Tao Ran circled his mouth with his tongue three times, even counting his wisdom teeth. He'd probably have to use all his willpower not to say anything.

Earlier, Tao Ran's hot sweat from running everywhere had contrasted with his inner chill as he absorbed the shocking news of Fei Du's condition—he had been hot outside and cold inside. But now, as his body temperature slowly dropped in the breezy autumn night, he began to feel like his organs had fallen into some bubbling vat. The heat had his blood boiling loudly in his ears—now he was cold outside and broiling inside.

Despite taking several deep breaths, he couldn't replenish the oxygen he'd burnt up. "What did Deputy Lu say?"

"His hands are tied," Lang Qiao replied. "There were two big developments today, and the fallout is too serious. Rumors and conspiracy theories are flying everywhere. Some people are also accusing us of incompetence or of diverging from protocol. The whole situation with

Wang Hongliang left some people with a bad impression, you know. They don't think the police can be trusted…"

Good deeds never got past the front door, but bad news traveled far and wide.

Sneaking onto the territory of a drug-trafficking ring alone for the sake of finding vital evidence, calmly directing the successful rescue of a bus of kidnapped kids, pulling an all-nighter to look for clues, solving a major cold case from two decades ago… Those had all just been part of their job, not worth mentioning. But if a single mishap occurred, everyone started to panic and point fingers at you. Suddenly, everybody had X-ray vision that could make out the word "conspiracy" carved into the crevices of each bone underneath a police uniform.

Everyone wanted an explanation from you. If there was no culprit to be found behind a horrifying incident, someone had to pay the price.

"It's okay." In the end, Tao Ran didn't swear; he managed to control his tongue. Lang Qiao was a girl, and in front of girls, men tended to rein themselves in no matter how bad their mood was. "It's okay, Xiao-Qiao. Don't panic. Just look at it as a regular report. I'll write both that and the reflection letter when I get back. For now, don't alarm Sergeant Luo—whether or not he's suspended won't make a huge difference to him for the moment. After all, would they ask an injured officer to work overtime? Now he won't even need to use his sick days."

"So now…" Lang Qiao began hesitantly.

"Now you guys just do whatever you're supposed to. Don't stop investigating Zheng Kaifeng. Keep digging. If obstacles come up, don't worry about them. Zheng Kaifeng's already dead. What can he do? If nothing else is working out, look into Zhou Huaijin and Hu Zhenyu. Zhou Huaijin wants to cooperate with us, and Hu Zhenyu has a lot of power at the Zhou Group's Yancheng headquarters. Even if they haven't got any hard evidence, they probably know a little more than us. If you need to, ask Zhou Huaijin to post a statement—he's the Zhou Group's proper heir, after all. And then…then…"

Tao Ran paused, gripping his phone so hard his knuckles turned white and veins bulged on the back of his hand. He tried repeatedly, but he couldn't utter what would come after "then."

What was he supposed to say? That they had a mole in their ranks and needed to investigate? How? Were they supposed to summon each member of the team individually into the interrogation room and tell them that honesty would earn them a lighter sentence, like they would a criminal?

Was the unpredictability of things outside the bureau not enough? Did people have to create internal conflicts as well?

And whom could Tao Ran say any of this to? Whom could he trust?

“And then, Deputy Tao?”

“I…I haven’t thought it through yet,” Tao Ran answered with difficulty. “Let me think. Let me get my thoughts straight first.”

His seemingly calm tone fooled Lang Qiao. Saying her name, he reiterated, “Don’t disturb Sergeant Luo. If the sky falls, I’ll deal with it. Don’t worry.”

Just from his voice, Lang Qiao could pick up on Deputy Tao’s usual warm smile. She didn’t doubt him; she agreed to his requests and hung up.

Once he’d set Lang Qiao at ease, Tao Ran felt as though a breath had gotten caught in his throat, unable to go up or down. As the dial tone sounded in his ear, his last bit of forced calm disintegrated. He practically wanted to jump up and shatter the earth by stomping a pit into the ground, screaming “Fuck your mom!” so loudly it shook the rafters.

Everyone who passed noticed the look on his face and subconsciously quickened their pace. They worried he was there to stab someone and cause the hospital trouble. Two patrolling security guards stared at him vigilantly.

Tao Ran suddenly lifted his phone in the air and aimed it at the wall, but just as he was about to throw it, he suddenly remembered the paltry sum in his bank account. After making his mortgage payment this month, he wouldn’t have enough to buy a new phone, but he’d still need to contact his colleagues, stay on top of the situation and react accordingly, and be available to report to the higher-ups at any moment. He couldn’t just go off the grid.

And so, in the nick of time, Tao Ran rescued his phone from death in the line of duty. Then, with no other way to vent his frustration, he pulled

the plastic case off the phone and made it his scapegoat, smashing it to innocent, helpless pieces.

Then, behind him, a woman's voice rang out. "Jeez, Xiao-Tao, who's gotten you so angry?" It was the voice of someone who was always smiling.

Looking back, Tao Ran saw three people emerge from the elevator at the far end of the hall—a middle-aged couple, plus a young man a few steps behind them who was helping to carry their things. The male half of the couple was very tall, and if it weren't for his serious, unsmiling expression, he would look just like an older Luo Wenzhou. The woman wore a long-sleeved dress. She was very smiley, and it was difficult to tell her age. Tao Ran had met them a few times before. They were Luo Wenzhou's parents.

Tao Ran froze, then reflexively stood up straight. "Hello, Uncle, Auntie."

Luo Wenzhou's mother, Mu Xiaoqing, pulled an apple from the fruit basket she'd brought with her and handed it to Tao Ran. She swiped a hand through his hair; the gesture was very natural. "Look how angry our Xiao-Tao is."

Tao Ran's wits returned to him, and he didn't know whether to laugh or cry. "Sergeant Luo's over there, Auntie."

Luo Wenzhou's father, Luo Cheng, gave him a reserved nod. He glanced over to check that Luo Wenzhou was still in one piece, then put his hands behind his back and strolled over to him. When he reached his injured son, the old man didn't say a single word. He just blocked the light and coughed once heavily.

Luo Wenzhou looked up and met his father's gaze with red-rimmed eyes. He picked his crutches up off the ground, forced himself upright, and moved to the side to make room for his father. Luo Cheng didn't try to act polite; he pulled his pants up a little and sat down in the patient's place shamelessly. He even managed to sit *arrogantly* in the shitty hospital chair as if it were the Iron Throne.

Then he commented on Luo Wenzhou's new look. "Look at you. All you'd need is a dirty old sack on your back, and you'd look like you could go beg on the subway."

Luo Wenzhou said nothing, his expression wooden.

Then Luo Cheng asked, “Were you crying? It’s just a suspension and a reflection letter. What’s the big deal?”

And after Tao Ran went through all that trouble to keep that information from Luo Wenzhou. Obviously a bag couldn’t keep a cat inside, but he’d hoped to at least keep Luo Wenzhou from having to worry about that right now. But when his dad arrived, he’d just ripped the bag open unexpectedly!

Unsurprisingly, Luo Wenzhou glanced right away at Tao Ran. Tao Ran evaded his gaze, preparing to escape. “Um…I’ll let you guys chat. I’m going to take a call.”

“Wait!” Luo Wenzhou said.

Tao Ran paused, peering at him very awkwardly.

Luo Wenzhou closed his eyes, falling silent again amid the thick stench of medicine. His ears were still ringing, as if the explosion was playing on repeat, and it seemed to be making him hallucinate. He kept hearing the “No Entry” ICU door in front of him open, as if they’d announce a certain person’s fate at any moment.

“W-Wenzhou…” Tao Ran stammered.

“Go find Lu-shu,” Luo Wenzhou said suddenly. “Tell him to deal with this situation harshly. As harshly as possible. While I’m suspended, he should launch a top-to-bottom internal investigation of the criminal investigation team. No officer related to the case should be allowed to leave. Have them hand over their communications devices and prepare to be questioned.”

Tao Ran froze, then realized: This would be the best time to find the mole!

From the side, Luo Cheng spoke up unhurriedly. “Even if the American president himself had committed murder and arson in our country, we’d have the right to investigate until we found the truth. We welcome those who come to our country to invest and create. Ideally, everyone would profit and grow together. But we’ll deal with those who have ulterior motives however they’re supposed to be dealt with. Yancheng

has come so far that a lot of people now want to ride on our coattails. What year is it? There's no need to curry favor with such ill-intentioned gods of wealth. That's my opinion, Xiao-Tao; please pass it along to your Deputy Lu."

The breath that had been caught in Tao Ran's throat since the call finally made its way out of him, and he turned to leave.

At that moment, the ICU door opened once more. Luo Wenzhou's crutches slid to the floor; he swayed slightly and nearly went down with them. Grabbing the annoying crutches, he clamped them under his arms, and hopped over on one leg.

Afraid that he'd subject his recently settled brain to another tsunami, Tao Ran hurried to stop him, racing forward. "Nurse!"

The nurse took off her mask as she glanced at the paper in her hand. "We were supposed to give the patient's family a notice of critical condition—I've already printed it out. The patient seems to have stabilized a bit, though. You can take a look at this, but you don't need to sign it."

"So how is he now?" Tao Ran asked anxiously.

"It's hard to say. He's not out of the woods yet," she replied. "Right now, it looks like things are taking a turn for the better. After all, he is quite young. Just wait for further news… Hey, you with the crutches over there, what's your deal? Are you a patient here? Why aren't you in your room at this hour?"

"He's going now; we're all going now," Tao Ran assured her. "He's just worried. The patient inside is—"

"—my husband," Luo Wenzhou said.

Tao Ran bit his tongue so hard he nearly took a chunk off. Blood flowed into his mouth, and he nearly cried from the pain.

"So can I stay here a while longer?" Luo Wenzhou asked hurriedly.

The nurse was either stupefied by his response, or extremely broad-minded. "Mm," she said, then turned to leave.

Tao Ran, Mu Xiaoqing, and Luo Cheng all looked at Luo Wenzhou, their eyes like six searchlights lined up in a row. Luo Wenzhou ignored

them all rather than explaining that he’d spoken in future tense. He hobbled to the trash can in the corner and threw up.

Chapter 16

THE HOSPITAL ADMINISTERED a series of first-aid measures that were swift, scientific, and completely unaffected by their patient's weak will.

For a few seconds, forceful stimulation had briefly returned Fei Du to consciousness. Pulled back from the unending nightmares, he became faintly aware of the sounds of medical equipment. As his awareness ebbed and flowed like the tide, those rhythmic sounds somehow warped, twisting into a familiar melody in his ears.

An eerie villa, a woman's gaze, wilted flowers, and the prisonlike electroshock therapy basement—all the various colors he'd seen in his life faded into silhouettes, filling up the song that repeated for the thousandth time.

A woman's frenzied voice pierced his muddled eardrums. "You can't obey! You can't give in! What did I read to you before? 'A man can be destroyed but not defeated.'[14] Fei Du! Fei Du!"

"Fei Du—"

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FEI DU KEPT DOZING OFF without realizing it. He woke on occasion, but before he even realized it, his consciousness would shift to some other dimension. He'd lost nearly all sense of time and space. This was an interesting new experience for him—as if he was undergoing a lengthy hibernation, his brain seemed to waver between freezing and restarting. It had never been so empty and free of worry in his life.

After three days in a coma, he started to develop a fuzzy awareness of his surroundings. He remembered that a bomb had landed him in the hospital. In his delirium, he sensed a visitor from time to time. That person

always touched him where there were no tubes, so they didn't seem like a doctor.

But the ICU only allowed half an hour of visiting time per day, and only one person at a time. And Fei Du spent most of his time either unconscious or semiconscious, so he had no understanding of what time it was—it was too difficult for him to ensure his waking hours aligned with the hours of these brief prison visits. If he managed to move his eyelids or fingers even slightly in response when his visitor called out to him, that meant fate had granted them a significant connection.

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TAO RAN RAN OUT NOISILY, decked in full PPE, and exclaimed, "When I called out to him, I saw his eyelashes move!"

"No way," Luo Wenzhou said. "When I went in just now, I even woke up the guy beside him, but he didn't react at all. You must've been seeing things."

Tao Ran was oblivious to the sergeant's unhappiness. "They really did move. Not just once either. If the doctor hadn't rushed me out, I might've seen his eyes open."

But his words only angered Luo "Out of Commission" Wenzhou further. "Then that must be because of my efforts earlier. You're just taking the credit for my work. Bring me the PPE—I want to go in again and make him move for me…"

Luo Wenzhou's mother, Mu Xiaoqing, arrived then. She whisked the two idiots away before the doctors and nurses could throw them out.

Mu Xiaoqing spoke to Luo Wenzhou first. "Those words bring back memories. When you were still in my belly, before you grew to be such a big lump, your father said exactly the same. You had to move for him. If you ignored him, he poked you through my belly. I suspect he might've poked you so hard that you lack brain cells now."

Luo Wenzhou was silent. He wasn't going to argue with the slanderous claim that he lacked brain cells just yet, but the way she'd compared the relationships was a bit strange.

Mrs. Mu Xiaoqing turned to Tao Ran and adopted the sort of caring voice that one reserved for talking about those with intellectual disabilities. "So we must be more understanding."

Tao Ran, too, was silent. Belatedly, he realized Luo Wenzhou might've been a little jealous earlier.

Mu Xiaoqing set Luo Wenzhou and Tao Ran to menial labor, ordering them to bring in cases of beverages and fruit she had in her car. She distributed the goods between the nurses' station and the attending doctor's office. As she passed the waiting room, the TV was playing a news report on Zhou Huaijin's self-orchestrated kidnapping.

Luo Wenzhou and Tao Ran both stopped in their tracks. Mu Xiaoqing immediately understood; she confiscated all Luo Wenzhou's cigarettes, and then—not wanting to get in the way—she left.

"…In other words, after you learned about the car crash, you decided to plan this whole thing?" asked the reporter who'd received exclusive interview rights. "Can I ask why?"

"Revenge." Zhou Huaijin sat before the camera in a brightly colored uniform without any accessories. Still, his posture was casual, his gaze firm, and his "rich young master" aura persisted. "My father had always harbored resentment toward me due to some baseless rumors. It's been hard living under his shadow all these years."

"Are you saying he abused you? Was there child abuse?"

Zhou Huaijin smiled. "It was something much harder to imagine than typical domestic child abuse," he said tactfully. "I always believed he wanted to kill me. That was the kind of relationship we had in private. But in public, we had to pretend to be a loving, wholesome family. Even after I came of age, I was still under his control. If he hadn't died, I still wouldn't have been able to come back to China so easily. And I can say I don't condone all of my father, Zhou Junmao, and Zheng Kaifeng's actions."

"What's something you don't condone?"

“The use of cross-border enterprises to participate in exploitative business practices, give rise to vicious competition, and even commit crimes,” said Zhou Huaijin. “I didn’t agree with these actions, especially not once I heard that Zhou Junmao had a bastard son. It all infuriated me. This may make me sound coldhearted, but when I first heard that he’d died, I wasn’t shocked or sad. Instead, I considered how to use that to my advantage. In the end, I chose to expose him via a relatively extreme method, then pushed all the blame onto the mysterious bastard. Two birds with one stone—that was my plan.”

“You couldn’t return to China, so you needed an accomplice.”

“Yes. Hu Zhenyu was my schoolmate, as well as an old friend. He hid his connection to me when he joined the Zhou Group. Only people close to us knew.”

The news cut to the evidence: secret coded documents that Hu Zhenyu and Zhou Huaijin had used to communicate, the transaction record from when Zhou Huaijin hired the “kidnappers,” and the “kidnappers’” testimony.

“Usually, reports on this kind of dramatic criminal case come out a minimum of a few months later,” said Tao Ran. “But this situation’s different; the media and Zhou Huaijin really didn’t have much time to prepare. It’s kind of impressive that Zhou Huaijin told pretty much the whole story without getting sidetracked by all that ‘legitimacy’ and ‘bastard’ bullshit. He’s done well. I guess he really does want to cooperate with us to avenge his brother. Now that he’s shown his cards like this without concern for his image, we’ll face a lot less resistance over our investigations. Oh, right—and I handed in your reflection letter for you. From what I gleaned from Deputy Lu, things should be all right once this all blows over.”

Showing no sign that this news pleased him, Luo Wenzhou extended a hand toward Tao Ran.

Tao Ran immediately understood. He glanced around, then pulled out the box of cigarettes that he’d smuggled in. Like university students skipping class, the pair snuck out of the inpatient area, running to a quiet corner.

Putting a cigarette between his lips, Luo Wenzhou threw his crutches aside and held his leg up. “How’s the internal investigation going?”

“No progress at all,” Tao Ran sighed. “I investigated everyone from top to bottom, just like how we question real suspects. It’s a good thing you were suspended; everyone cooperated because they could tell how serious this was. I really couldn’t tell who the mole was, though. Ruling all of them out, it might be *me*.”

“When we questioned Zhou Huaijin, everyone who could watch the feed would have heard what he said.” Luo Wenzhou mulled that over, then added, “Still, the fact that Yang Bo received photos of the officers tailing him that night right before he went downstairs is extremely suspicious.”

The officers keeping an eye on Yang Bo had switched out every four hours. They’d followed a timetable initially, but in practice, they ended up switching shifts a lot, so that schedule became a mess. Luo Wenzhou was never even sure who was actually on duty on a given night; he usually just contacted whoever was in charge.

Yet the photos Yang Bo received had been accurate.

“Only the people out tailing Yang Bo that night would have known exactly who was with them,” Tao Ran mused. “Or if it wasn’t them, someone must’ve logged into the time-clock software.”

To standardize management, the municipal bureau had updated its fieldwork-specific mobile-work system. Once their task was established in the system, an officer just needed to use their phone to log the necessary fieldwork in the right spot.

“The only two people on the criminal investigation team with access to fieldwork statuses are you and me. Above us are various department heads and deputies as well as upper-level management.” Luo Wenzhou’s voice was nearly as light as the smoke wafting from between his fingers. “So either the mole is one of us, or someone hacked into a system we spent a ton of money on, and the people in charge of its security have proven themselves utterly useless by not noticing. Which answer appeals more to you?”

Both sounded equally bad to Tao Ran. He passed a tired hand over his face. Then, after a moment, he forced himself to focus. “I have two

pieces of relatively good news. Want to hear them?”

Luo Wenzhou didn’t respond.

“Thanks to Hu Zhenyu’s cooperation, the investigation against the Zhou Group is going a lot more smoothly. We may have evidence that three of their charity funds are fronts for accounting fraud and cross-border money laundering. Aside from that, the Zhou Group is also suspected of spreading unconfirmed rumors, manipulating the market, slandering competitors, and bribery.”

“We’re not in charge of financial crimes.” Luo Wenzhou stretched out his arms and flicked some ash into the garbage can. “What else?”

“I wasn’t finished. Based on that evidence, we’ve requested help from overseas. Remember that mysterious shell company Zheng Kaifeng compensated his thugs from? Last year, that company paid a deposit labeled ‘service fee,’ and it recently paid the rest of the balance. The timing was rather interesting. The deposit was made around when Dong Qian started to get mail frequently, and the balance was paid the day after Zhou Junmao’s car crash.”

Luo Wenzhou was silent for a while. “How much was it?”

“Eight digits all in all.”

“But we didn’t find that money earlier,” Luo Wenzhou said immediately.

“No, because the deposit wasn’t much, and it was saved in an overseas account held by a shell company. The person in charge of that company has run off already. But that shell company and Dong Qian had sent each other packages before, so it tracks that they’d been in contact. We haven’t found the rest of the money, no. But we suspect it crossed the border through an underground bank, and that they hadn’t had time to get it to Dong Qian yet,” Tao Ran explained. “The night that Zhou Junmao died, the board secretary, Yang Bo, called Zhou Junmao’s driver just to chat. The driver thinks he might’ve revealed what car Zhou Junmao would be in during that conversation. And we found the tools and materials for a homemade bomb in the basement of Zheng Kaifeng’s Yancheng residence.”

Luo Wenzhou narrowed his eyes and rapped his knuckles gently on his knee. “You’re saying that Zheng Kaifeng colluded with Yang Bo. One

paid for a killer, and one was the mole. They planned Zhou Junmao's car crash, and then Zheng Kaifeng got wind that their plans were about to be exposed, so he grabbed Yang Bo and tried to escape. But we caught them, so they activated the bomb they'd installed under the truck ahead of time to die together…?"

"That's the working theory," Tao Ran said. "We're just missing some key pieces of evidence."

Luo Wenzhou fell silent. From Zhou Junmao's accident to all the bizarre situations that had followed, everything was still a mystery. Both the criminal investigation and the investigation into the Zhou Group's financials had hit dead ends. But then Zheng Kaifeng had died, and suddenly, the municipal bureau was on a lucky streak. Everything was going more smoothly; suddenly, they were puzzling out the truth.

"I have a feeling," Luo Wenzhou said abruptly, "that the key evidence won't be hard to find. They might close this case soon."

Hearing what he'd implied, Tao Ran went still.

Luo Wenzhou put out his cigarette. "These last few days, I keep thinking about one thing. I don't know if it's a coincidence, but Fei Du's father is also comatose due to a car crash."

Tao Ran had been ready to listen, thinking that Luo Wenzhou, who was in the hospital and suspended from work, might have arrived at some great insight. But it turned out he just wanted to talk about Fei Du.

To this day, Tao Ran could not comprehend how these two people, who used to be at each other's throats whenever they saw each other, had managed to get together. Now one of them, having seemingly lost his mind, was unable to stop talking about Fei Du for more than three sentences at a time.

He patted Luo Wenzhou's shoulder. "Just hang in there for a few more days. The doctor said he'll wake up within that time. And once his condition stabilizes, they can move him to a regular room. Then you can look at him as long as you want, all right?"

"I'm being serious." Luo Wenzhou slapped Tao Ran's hand away. "I've had nothing better to do while I've been here, so I looked into that audiobook app you mentioned. Back when Lao-Yang was killed, Zero

Degree Reading was still a radio program, so I snuck out of the hospital a handful of times and found the broadcaster who worked on it then. He dug up notes from the show for me."

Without consciously realizing it, Tao Ran sat up straighter.

"At the time of Lao-Yang's death, we overlooked the Reciter's handle, because it wasn't showing up for the first time. It first appeared a little earlier—when Fei Du's father had his car accident. The Reciter was requesting *Wuthering Heights*."

Tao Ran was silent for a long while. "If not for the fact that I was suspicious about that whole thing first," he said finally, "I might've thought that you were experiencing some aftereffects from your concussion. Man, I wish Fei Du could be up and jumping around tomorrow."

Fei Du's father had gotten into a car accident. The various incidents surrounding the Zhous had included car accidents. Yang Bo's father—who was involved in the case—had likewise been involved in a car accident. On top of that, the accident Yang Bo's father was in seemingly had some unexplainable connection to the serial kidnapping case from twenty years ago… Meanwhile, a mysterious contributor to an audiobook program appeared to be weaving their way through it all, and tying it to the old criminal investigator Yang Zhengfeng's suspicious death. It all sounded fantastical, like there was an invisible mesh beneath their peaceful, prosperous city, and you had to sink to its lowest depths to peek at what was wrong. Even then, it was unbelievable—you'd think your eyes were playing tricks on you.

Fei Du—only Fei Du—would know what happened in that version of *Wuthering Heights*, if it existed.

"But for all these years, he's never said a word about it, or displayed any abnormal behavior," Tao Ran murmured. "Does he bury things deeper than the Mariana Trench? Or have we gone insane?"

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MR. MARIANA TRENCH lay in the ICU for two more days before finally he fulfilled his sentence and was released, moving to a single-person room where visitors were allowed anytime.

Since the bed was being moved around so much, its rocking woke Fei Du up despite how little energy he had. He opened his eyes with great difficulty, but his vision spun, and he couldn't see anything clearly. Maybe it was the drugs, or maybe he'd just been lying down for too long. Unaccustomed to being in such a vulnerable state, he scrunched his eyebrows together against the sudden harsh light, then squeezed his eyes shut and struggled to sit up so he could at least ascertain what sort of situation he was in.

Suddenly, something covered his eyes, and a pair of warm lips touched his forehead gently. Fei Du quieted at the familiar touch.

"I'm here," someone said next to his ear. "Everything is fine. Rest. We can talk when you wake up."

That voice seemed to come from his dreams. Its familiarity made him tremble. It was what he'd been waiting for.

Fei Du's furrowed brow slowly relaxed as he imagined a faint smoky smell that released uncontrollable drowsiness. He wanted to hold the hand that was covering his eyes before he sank back into a deep slumber. Unfortunately, one of his arms was attached to an IV, and the other was firmly encased in a cast. He didn't have enough limbs, so he could only give up.

To Fei Du, consciousness felt like regaining ownership of the scepter of fate. There was a rocky guardian mountain in his heart. Grass didn't grow on it, but it was indestructible. He didn't need the will to live. He could sweep all distractions from his mind naturally, with well-practiced ease, doing everything he could to influence his nearly exhausted bodily functions. He was "recharging" whenever he slept, and each time he woke, it was clear that his condition was improving.

Of course, Luo-shixiong's *care* was playing a significant role.

He claimed he was there to take care of Fei Du, but the private caregiver they'd employed was the one doing all of the actual work. Luo

Wenzhou's daily tasks were to run to Fei Du's room and eat each of his three meals there, then loaf around and use Fei Du's TV to watch soccer games or culinary programs. He wouldn't leave until Fei Du couldn't stay awake anymore and nodded off.

The most annoying thing was that every time he ate, he did so upwind of Fei Du, so that every single particle of pork-bone soup aroma floated over to the patient. The TV was often simultaneously playing something like a sizzling steak going from raw to cooked in HD. Sound, color, smell, and taste surrounded Fei Du, who was like a zombie who couldn't speak or move. He was getting a good sense of what "no good deed goes unpunished" meant.

Fei Du, who was being fed through an IV, turned his gaze to Luo Wenzhou.

Although Luo Wenzhou met his eyes, he didn't seem to notice the silent reproach within them. He was in the process of delivering a speech. "The pork-bone soup that my mom makes can't really be called pork-bone soup. I always tell her that amateurs like her should braise the pork, but she won't listen. She insists that braising is unhealthy and that stewing it in clear broth is better. Look—she didn't season it at the right time, the salt is wrong, and let's not even talk about the heat control. If I gave this to a cat, I bet that cat would go bury it outside."

Fei Du watched him continue to grumble as he drank most of the bowl in one gulp.

After meeting his gaze for a while, Luo Wenzhou suddenly seemed to realize something. Annoyingly, he leaned in closer. "How come you're looking at me like that? Do you want some?"

Fei Du blinked feebly at him.

Without hesitation, Luo Wenzhou grabbed the last piece of pork rib. "When you're ready to call me 'Ge,' I'll give you a treat."

Fei Du looked at him silently. He wasn't actually all that interested in the soup; he just thought watching Luo Wenzhou was interesting. This man was as noisy as a hundred normal people. As soon as he walked in, the frigid, empty hospital room became lively.

Once Luo Wenzhou had finished livestreaming his meal in front of Fei Du, he hobbled off to clean up after himself so that the real caretaker wouldn't have to later. Then he peeked outside the room like a criminal. Seeing that no medical staff were about to turn up, he quickly closed the door and strolled to Fei Du's bed.

"I'm going to do something against the rules. Don't make any noise."

Fei Du looked down at his own body, doubting that it offered Luo Wenzhou any way to break the rules. He looked back up at Luo Wenzhou expectantly, excited to learn some novel ways of having fun from his shixiong…and then he saw Luo Wenzhou bring out a little jar of honey.

Oh, Fei Du thought blankly. If he'd been able to make a sound, he'd have told Luo Wenzhou that he wasn't the kind of glutton who couldn't go a couple of months without a feast.

"On the sly," Luo Wenzhou murmured to Fei Du like a criminal selling opium. "Just a little. I don't have more."

He put a few drops of the honey on the lid and diluted it with warm water, then dipped a cotton swab in it and carefully swiped the swab against the seam of Fei Du's pale lips.

Though this method of "rule-breaking" fell far short of his expectations, Fei Du played along and gave the swab a little lick. *Acacia honey,* he thought, simultaneously sweeping his gaze over the man before him.

Luo Wenzhou looked a little skinnier. Clearly, a few pieces of pork rib alone weren't enough to heal his major injuries. He couldn't quite put his weight on his injured leg yet, so it hung there limply—Fei Du was rather impressed that Luo Wenzhou could keep his balance. Nearly healed scrapes, now nothing but light marks, peeked from beneath his rolled-up sleeves. When Luo Wenzhou leaned in close, Fei Du caught the scent of detergent warmed by his body heat.

Bet it'd feel great to touch such warm skin, came a thought out of nowhere. Fei Du narrowed his eyes as a beast quietly reared its head internally, opining that Luo Wenzhou's slightly haggard appearance was extremely alluring. The lustful Fei-zong was basically a blinking, living corpse—completely incapacitated—but that didn't stop him from looking

over every bit of Luo Wenzhou below the neck and above the knee multiple times. He was sure the sight would be tastier than the much-maligned pork-bone soup.

Luo Wenzhou concentrated on feeding Fei Du the honey water, worried that the cotton swab would hurt him. He had to be careful not to get the sticky liquid everywhere too. And since he was nearly breaking into a sweat over a simple lidful of honey water, he had no attention to spare for the deep, wicked eyes of a certain wealthy young man.

“Why did you put yourself in front of me? You were fine hiding behind the car. You’d have ended up with raw skin at worst,” Luo Wenzhou said in a gentle voice as he fed Fei Du the honey water, apparently oblivious. “Weren’t you going to use your professional-grade perversions to start up ‘How to Kill People Without a Trace’ classes? How did you go astray and wind up in the business of sacrificing yourself to save someone else’s life?”

The corners of Fei Du’s lips lifted slightly.

“Don’t smile,” Luo Wenzhou warned. “I almost started to think that that masterpiece of yours would be your swan song. A few days ago, I asked someone to buy me a frame specifically for it. Now that it’s framed, I plan to hang it by my bed.”

It took Fei Du a while to put together what “masterpiece” Luo Wenzhou was referring to. At the meeting that day, Fei Du had drawn two portraits on his meeting notes out of boredom. Both were of Luo Wenzhou. One showed him well-dressed and sitting upright. The other was a lot more crass. The model’s wardrobe in that one was significantly more casual…in that he wore only a tie.

The great Sergeant Luo had slapped the former onto the artist’s chest and confiscated the latter at the scene.

Fei Du couldn’t stop himself from picturing what that drawing would look like hanging by Luo Wenzhou’s bed. He immediately surrendered to Luo Wenzhou’s shamelessness, unconsciously pursing his lips so that a bead of water dripped down from them. Luo Wenzhou moved quickly to wipe it away, but in the same instant, Fei Du licked at it. The tip of his tongue met Luo Wenzhou’s hand, and they both froze.

Before Luo Wenzhou could react, Fei Du pushed things even further: He curled his tongue around Luo Wenzhou's fingertip, drawing a half circle.

Luo Wenzhou was stunned.

Fei Du slowly retracted his tongue and blinked calmly at the sergeant as if nothing had happened. His eyes were half smiling; they looked larger now that illness had thinned his face, their corners hooking Luo Wenzhou in. In their depths was that expression "Fei-zong" often wore—the one that used to give Luo Wenzhou a headache.

Though Fei Du couldn't so much as hum right then, Luo Wenzhou could interpret what he wanted to say: *"When you finally call me 'Ge,' and I can answer, I'll give you a treat."*

Among the world population of severely injured, bedbound patients who could barely move their facial muscles, Fei Du might well win the title of "Greatest Pervert."

Having underestimated his opponent for a moment, Luo Wenzhou had fallen for his trap. His licked finger numbed, then went burning hot, and his restless Adam's apple bobbed. "You—" He was interrupted by his phone vibrating in his pocket. "Just you wait!"

On the other end, Tao Ran was baffled. "Huh? Wait for what? Is now not a good time?"

"I wasn't talking to you." Luo Wenzhou put the phone on speaker. Then, thinking about it and deciding he wasn't satisfied, he delivered a light smack to Fei Du's forehead. "Any progress today?"

Suspended and on sick leave, Luo Wenzhou was spending all his time loitering in the hospital, seemingly without a care. Despite that, he was still up to monitoring the criminal investigation team's progress remotely. He truly was something.

"We found records of Dong Qian sending packages overseas," Tao Ran said. "It was around the time Zheng Kaifeng paid that first deposit. The address was that shell company's underground bank, and the package description just read 'contract.' We've now located one of the duplicate contracts—Dong Qian stored it anonymously in his trucking company's warehouse. Not even his coworkers knew that box was his. We got

permission from the admin and the other truckers storing their stuff there, then went through everyone's belongings. That was when we found it. It's a contract written in English for an overseas investment firm. Dong Qian probably didn't understand what it was and forgot about it, which would be why he didn't mail it to Dong Xiaoqing."

Many underground money-laundering businesses ran a pawn shop or currency exchange service as a front. The illegal cash that went through their underground network would get saved in a bank under the name of some organization, and the organization would turn it into some kind of asset, calling it an "investment." After a few rounds of this, the dirty cash, now "legitimate" and accounted for, would return to the original owner's hands.

In exchange for killing Zhou Junmao, Zheng Kaifeng had given the truck driver Dong Qian two payments. The second payment couldn't be found now, since the police's sudden involvement had alerted those holding the money. Still, what had happened with the deposit was clear: Zheng Kaifeng had paid it from the overseas company, then laundered the money through the underground bank. The entire process was almost complete. If things hadn't come to light has they had, then before long, Dong Xiaoqing might have received an unexpected payment of "investment income," and lived in lavish ignorance for the rest of her life.

Dong Qian hadn't been rich, but he also wasn't poor. As a hardworking citizen, he'd never seen such a huge sum of money, but if he had, it might not have swayed him—he'd have known that it was dirty money. He would also have had no concept of what to do with that much money, so he couldn't have gotten greedy over something. In that case, what had he given up his life for?

"What else was stored anonymously in that warehouse?" Luo Wenzhou asked.

"A photo of Dong Qian's late wife, and a paper doll—the kind you burn for dead people," Tao Ran said. "The doll was in a kneeling pose, and Zhou Junmao's name was written on the back of its head. We asked all the nearby funeral-goods stores, and at one, they recognized the doll. The boss said it had been ordered a month before Zhou Junmao's accident. He still had the receipt. The signature and contact information were Dong Qian's.

The doll left a deep impression on the store owner because the kneeling pose was eerie, so he thought the buyer might be doing some witchcraft or occult business. The owner's description of the doll matched the one we found.

"Let me summarize the whole case. Dong Qian's wife died twenty-one years ago in a car accident. He raised his daughter on his own for all these years, never knowing the true reason for his wife's death. Then, one day, a mysterious delivery driver came to his door and handed him a package, although he hadn't purchased anything. The package revealed the truth behind his wife's death. After his shock subsided, Dong Qian contacted the mysterious sender—his repeated 'online purchases' and 'returns' were actually him communicating with them through the delivery driver. They sent him proof and asked Dong Qian to work with them. Dong Qian didn't really care about the money—besides, it would have been too complicated to figure out how the dirty money would get into his hands. He must only have cared about revenge. He didn't even bother to find someone to translate that complex contract for him. Through all this, Zheng Kaifeng never showed his face. On top of that, he managed to completely hide his connection to the car crash all those years ago. He probably even used Zhou Huaijin's name to hire someone to kill Zhou Junmao—that's why, after Dong Xiaoqing learned a portion of the truth, she decided to risk trying to kill Zhou Huaijin."

"Then how do you explain the package Dong Qian mailed to himself before he died?" Luo Wenzhou interjected.

"According to this theory, Dong Qian probably sent it. Dong Qian's goal was revenge, but there was still a big chunk of change involved that would one day make it to his daughter's account. If Dong Xiaoqing didn't know anything, the money could have scared her. But he didn't think her reaction would be so extreme."

Luo Wenzhou's forehead wrinkled. "Then who orchestrated Dong Xiaoqing's car accident?"

"Remember that security camera from their neighbor's house?" Tao Ran asked. "The one that captured the arsonist. Our tech department found that the camera had been hacked. Someone was spying on the Dong family through it. And the last time Haiyang and the others went to speak to Dong

Xiaoqing, she retrieved a package from the electrical room. The shipping label was visible on camera. Dong Qian had sent it to himself."

Luo Wenzhou glanced at Fei Du. If the young man's gaze was lazy earlier, it was now entirely alert. In fact, he was staring sharply at the phone.

"But if I remember correctly," Luo Wenzhou said, "the last time Xiao Haiyang visited the Dong family was still several days before Dong Xiaoqing tried to kill Zhou Huaijin. Why didn't Dong Xiaoqing's killer make a move then?"

"Because she was getting frequent visits from reporters at the time, and she always hid from them at home—she wasn't going outside. Killing her inside her own home would be too risky. Also, no one knew what Dong Qian had mailed to himself. If he'd mailed something irrelevant home, killing her would draw too much attention."

Luo Wenzhou seemed to recall something. "Mm. Continue," he said blandly.

"Three days later, Dong Xiaoqing left her house. First, she bought some flowers at a florist's shop. Then she rode the bus to Heng'ai Hospital. She had a knife in her bag. She looked like the innocent, harmless family member of the driver who'd caused the accident, like she wanted to visit the victim out of guilt. I don't think whoever was tailing her at the time ever thought she'd try stabbing someone in broad daylight."

Luo Wenzhou paused. "Dong Xiaoqing spent three days alone after she got that package that Dong Qian mailed home. And she still chose revenge."

A person could do anything in the heat of the moment, but "moment" was the operative word. Nothing could make someone act impulsively for three days. So what had Dong Xiaoqing done in those seventy-two hours alone?

She might've tried to verify the information in the package. Or she could've been planning her revenge against the Zhou family. She'd had Xiao Haiyang's contact information, and she could've dialed 110 at any moment.

Had she hesitated at any point? Was there an instant when she'd taken out her phone and dialed the number, wanting to hand everything over to the police? To wait for society to give her an answer, whether her father was the victim or the murderer?

It took him a great deal of effort, but Fei Du curled a finger of the hand attached to the IV, then tapped the bed railing weakly but rhythmically. Luo Wenzhou immediately grabbed his finger.

"Don't move," he said in a low voice. "I'm not a spy. I don't know Morse code."

It took Tao Ran a moment to understand whom the sergeant was talking to. "Am I on speaker? I was wondering why there was an echo. Is Fei Du next to you? Fei Du, are you awake? How do you feel today? You weren't quite conscious when I visited you two days ago. Did you see the fruit I bought you? Xiao-Qiao brought you a little teddy too."

Most of that fruit had entered gluttonous Luo Wenzhou's belly, and the teddy bear's head was encased in the plastic packaging from one piece of fruit—likewise the work of Luo Wenzhou. Its paws were raised and pressed tightly against the wall. It was evidently a thief bear who'd just robbed a bank and had now been cornered by the police. The display was quite tasteful.

"We were all terrified that day," Tao Ran continued. "You don't even know. Lao-Luo even—"

Luo Wenzhou's reaction to this was swift as lightning: Within a single syllable, he knew what "Tao Ran-His-Mouth" was about to say and immediately interrupted, declaring, "He still can't speak or eat. All the fruit got donated to me. All right—enough bullshit. Get back to the point. What's your speculation based on? Dong Xiaoqing didn't live in the middle of nowhere. If she was followed whenever she left the house, why didn't we notice?"

As a professional, Tao Ran possessed focus like that of a compass. Although it occasionally suffered interference, it always righted itself with a little prod. After Luo Wenzhou cut him off, he immediately forgot what he'd been about to reveal, growing serious again. "Because we focused on the wrong thing at the beginning of the investigation. There were about a dozen security cameras on her route to the florist after she left her house.

Eight of them caught her. After that, she got on the bus fifty yards away from the florist and headed for Heng'ai Hospital. We pulled footage from those eight cameras at the time and looked into passengers who'd boarded at the same stop, as well as those in the cars following her bus, but we didn't find anything."

Luo Wenzhou furrowed his brow, absently massaging the cold, dry skin between Fei Du's fingers.

"But when we went back to look into the florist's shop again and pulled footage from the surrounding civilian cameras, we spotted a cyclist."

"Cyclist?" Luo Wenzhou wasn't sure he'd caught what Tao Ran said. "You mean one of those serious bicycle riders?"

Cyclists often spent so long outside that regular sunscreen wasn't enough. Many covered themselves from head to toe so that they weren't exposing an inch of skin. It was the perfect disguise.

"Yeah. A small camera at a bookstore's side entrance caught this cyclist seemingly resting at the roadside. He had his face completely covered, and he wore shades. He was less than a hundred yards from Dong Xiaoqing. Then, the cyclist took a shortcut, arrived at the next bus stop, folded up his bike, and boarded the bus. He rode two stops before getting off, and he didn't interact with Dong Xiaoqing. That's why we didn't notice him at first."

"Could it have been a coincidence? Maybe this person didn't want to take the bus and just got tired. We can't just make him a suspect because he wanted to get out of the sun, right?"

"It wasn't a coincidence," Tao Ran said firmly. "The stolen car that killed Dong Xiaoqing started following her between the stop where the cyclist got off and the next stop. When we realized that, we checked cameras around Dong Xiaoqing's house—three caught that cyclist. We traced his route and found that he'd basically followed her the entire way. Biking is a little faster than walking, so he deliberately took a bunch of detours. Avoiding every single camera wasn't realistic, but he was very careful to avoid any that had filmed Dong Xiaoqing."

Dong Xiaoqing's stalker had never appeared in the same frame as her. To minimize the risk of the police noticing him, he'd even avoided getting

on and off the bus at the same stops she did. And if the police did notice him, he'd be hard to identify completely covered by his cyclist getup.

The cyclist had been professional and careful, and his ability to avoid the police suggested that he'd been trained.

"The cyclist followed her for the first half of her journey, and the car-stealing killer followed her for the next half. If Dong Xiaoqing had behaved herself and left after giving Zhou Huaijin the flowers, the car thief would've abandoned the car before its owner even had a chance to report it missing to the police. But then, unexpectedly, Dong Xiaoqing actually tried to stab Zhou Huaijin."

If Zheng Kaifeng had assumed Zhou Huaijin's identity to contact Dong Qian, then the moment Zhou Huaijin was attacked, Zheng Kaifeng would have recognized that Dong Xiaoqing knew something—that there had been something pertinent inside that package Dong Qian had mailed her. So Zheng Kaifeng had decided to silence her permanently.

"Conclusive evidence," Luo Wenzhou sighed. "Just figuring out the sequence of events isn't enough, Tao Ran. We need conclusive evidence."

Weariness entered Tao Ran's voice. "It's not easy to find. Zheng Kaifeng's been burnt to a crisp. Right now, all we can prove is that Zheng Kaifeng, Yang Bo, and the others are connected to the case. The Zhou Group's headquarters are overseas; that's beyond our jurisdiction. We can't just investigate them whenever we want. If we hadn't caught Zheng Kaifeng's thugs a few days ago, and if his money-laundering people hadn't all run, we might not even have discovered the transaction between him and Dong Qian."

"I know," Luo Wenzhou said. "You guys have worked hard recently."

Suddenly, Fei Du strained against Luo Wenzhou's grasp, pulling his finger free. Clumsily, as though his finger didn't want to listen to him, Fei Du wrote on Luo Wenzhou's palm, *Wait a while.*

Before he'd even finished writing *while*, Luo Wenzhou understood what he meant. Catching Fei Du's finger again, he gave Tao Ran a few more instructions and hung up. Then he patted Fei Du's thigh lightly. "You're just listening in. Why do you keep trying to offer your opinions? If you dare pull that needle out, I'll hit you."

Since Luo Wenzhou was immobilizing his only means of communication, Fei Du could only look at him, exasperated.

“‘Wait a while,’” Luo Wenzhou said. “I know what you mean. Zheng Kaifeng’s dead, but this case spans so many years, involving so many grudges and enemies. It isn’t natural for the evidence to come out all at once, right?”

Fei Du blinked.

“I have a feeling,” Luo Wenzhou said suddenly, “that you understand this case much better than any of us.”

Fei Du just looked at him silently.

Luo Wenzhou squeezed his finger. “Last time, you wanted me to sacrifice my privacy in exchange for information. What do you want this time?”

When Fei Du pressed his finger to Luo Wenzhou’s palm, Luo Wenzhou released him, allowing him to write. Luo Wenzhou didn’t know whether Fei Du was doing it deliberately, but every stroke his finger made seemed extra long. His neat, round, well-manicured nail swept across the sergeant’s palm.

Luo Wenzhou read out the first word. “‘Top.’ Top of what?”

Fei Du boldly wrote the next word: *you*.

Luo Wenzhou stared at his palm for a while, as though he was illiterate, his eyebrows flying up and down as various expressions flitted across his face. In the end, he snorted, shook his head, and flicked Fei Du’s face lightly. “In your dreams, babe.”

Fei Du looked at him with a hint of a smile.

Bracing his hands on either side of Fei Du’s pillow, Luo Wenzhou leaned over him. Carefully avoiding Fei Du’s injured shoulder, he lowered his head and lay a soft kiss on his lips.

“It really is time for you to go back to dreamland anyway. Sleep. When you wake up, I’ll have dinner with you.”

He tucked Fei Du in, turned off the TV, closed the curtains, and then exited the room to speak to the professional caretaker waiting outside. After

that, he left slowly on his crutches.

Every day, at the same time, Luo Wenzhou came to harass the patient. He was helping Fei Du maintain a healthy sleep schedule based on when he was most alert, in case his injuries made it hard for him to tell day from night. Now that a few days had passed, Fei Du was conditioned to feel sleepy as soon as Luo Wenzhou pulled the curtains shut. But today—perhaps because of Tao Ran's call—Fei Du suddenly couldn't sleep.

Zheng Kaifeng's cold stare, Yang Bo's panicked face, Zhou Huaijin's red eyes, Zhou Huaixin covered in blood… They all lingered in his mind's eye. He watched Luo Wenzhou disappear around the corner. Then the caretaker came in and adjusted the flow of his IV.

It was a little cold. Fei Du let out a small sigh.

Half a month later, Luo Wenzhou returned to his job, reporting for duty at the municipal bureau. On his second day back in charge of the Zhou Group case, the police got a call.

Chapter 17

IN YANCHENG'S PING'AN DISTRICT, the local street police station received a report from headquarters.

There was a group of old apartment buildings within their jurisdiction. They'd once been mixed-use commercial and residential structures. Now they were old and in a state of disrepair, and the low rent and sales prices attracted a lot of out-of-towners and other people on a budget. The residents were a complicated mishmash of people who came and went. Conflicts broke out every couple of days.

A family in one building had been smelling an indescribable stench for days. One family member happened to be pregnant, and she couldn't stand the smell. When they determined that it was coming from next door, they tried to speak to their neighbors, but no one ever answered the door. They then appealed to the nearly entirely absent property manager. The property manager looked the unit up and found that—although it had been rented out—the renter hadn't left any contact information on file, and the landlord's number was no longer in service.

The family was furious. They thought the property manager was deliberately ignoring the problem, and they wanted to break into the unit next door. This resulted in a fight with the property manager, and ultimately the police were called. The Ping'an Street Police Station dispatched two officers experienced in mediating neighborhood conflicts. They had just arrived, but before they could flex their skills, someone from the pregnant lady's family delivered a shadowless kick to the old apartment door. Its hinges snapped.

This unleashed an odor so foul it could have featured in *Resident Evil*. The entire group outside the door nearly collapsed on the spot. One of the older officers, thinking that the smell was familiar, suddenly remembered something. His expression changed, and he ordered everyone to stay outside. After getting out some shoe covers and a baton, the officer carefully checked the apartment's interior. Then he opened the fridge.

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THREE HOURS LATER, cars from the municipal bureau had taken over all the empty space in front of the apartment.

Luo Wenzhou was still limping, but he had long since grown accustomed to a dignified, peaceful coexistence with the cane constituting his “third leg.” He claimed that he wouldn’t have any problem climbing a roof or catching a thief at this point, so coming out to a crime scene was nothing. Holding his cane horizontally behind his back like a video-game character might hold a sword, he stood in front of the fridge without wobbling—despite the fact that it was quite difficult to stand on a single leg. Then he leaned in to observe the dude inside.

Yes: There was a male corpse in the fridge.

Winter had come early, and all the buildings in Yancheng’s various districts were already turning on the heat. No one was paying this unit’s bills, so the electricity had been cut off half a month ago, and the early arrival of artificial heat elsewhere in the building only worsened the situation with the shut-off fridge. With the temperature rapidly rising, a wide variety of bacteria were throwing the party of the century in the corpse, creating an amazing biochemical reaction.

Lang Qiao had been helping Luo Wenzhou stay upright initially, but she only managed thirty seconds before the shocking smell nearly killed her and she fled the scene. When she reached the door, she yelled back, “Boss, have you got sinusitis?”

“As a police officer who also knows his way around the kitchen, I’ve seen all kinds of living organisms deteriorate in my private and professional lives. What haven’t I seen? You get used to it,” Luo Wenzhou replied, not turning his head. He waved at the forensic pathologists. “All right. I’m done looking. Take it away.”

“Sergeant Luo, look.” Tao Ran held out a folder. “This was found under the deceased’s pillow.”

Luo Wenzhou put on his gloves and took it. It was an ordinary file folder with a few pieces of paper inside. Each page had a photo of a

different person stuck to it, along with basic information on that person like their name, gender, and address. In the corner of each page was a date and a mysterious number. Some pages were printed, some handwritten. The handwritten words were written with a heavy hand, and a lot of characters were written incorrectly.

Dong Xiaoqing's photo was in there, on the first page. Her photo had been crossed out with a red marker, which was why this case had been reported to the municipal bureau immediately.

Xiao-Wu poked his head in. "Why does it look like a grade-schooler wrote this?"

"An overly mature grade-schooler who kills for a living," Tao Ran said, looking around the apartment.

The space was very open concept. Outside the bathroom, there were no walls to demarcate other rooms—so it was a rather simple, crude space. There was a fridge that ended up storing a corpse, a couch so dirty that you couldn't tell what color it actually was, a three-legged plastic chair, a coffee table, an old-fashioned cabinet, a dust-covered TV, and a simple fold-out bed. That was it for furniture. Tattered, yellowed magazines were piled on the couch, and they also found a set of playing cards and a few loaded dice. Beer bottles and take-out containers had been heaped in a corner. They stank too, but they were a far lesser evil than the apartment's actual resident.

There was a suitcase under the cabinet. In addition to clothes, it contained an array of tools for committing crimes: rubber gloves and boots, a hood, a tarp, illegal knives, a hammer, a metal bar, a taser, and lock-picking tools. In the middle were a few neat stacks of hundred-yuan bills—at a glance, probably about a hundred thousand yuan. All of this was arranged around a benevolent-looking porcelain Buddha.

"Don't you like Léon,[15] Goggle-Eyes Lang?" Luo Wenzhou asked Lang Qiao. "We have locally grown Léon here. Come look, quick."

"Since you're my boss, I'll pretend you didn't just say that," Lang Qiao replied quietly. "Anyone who insults my man is my mortal enemy."

Luo Wenzhou snorted at this vulgar woman who wasn't even bold enough to defend her idol outright. He turned to Xiao Haiyang. "What was

the deceased's identity?"

"This is the ID that was in his bag. The name on it is Wang Xincheng—male, thirty-nine years old. But I looked him up just now, and his ID is fake. The photo doesn't match the information." Xiao Haiyang handed Luo Wenzhou the very convincing fake ID. The man in the photo had a buzz cut and an otherwise unremarkable appearance. He stared straight at the viewer, looking extraordinarily fierce and vicious.

"A person who needs a fake ID typically has some criminal history. He might be an escaped convict," said Luo Wenzhou. "Go check the photo against our database."

Xiao Haiyang quickly agreed.

"Sergeant Luo, there was a total of a hundred and twenty thousand in cash," Tao Ran said, having swiftly counted the money surrounding the Buddha. "That's the exact same number on Dong Xiaoqing's page next to the date. It was probably the pay he received for taking her out. The last transaction record in the trash pile was dated the day before Dong Xiaoqing died. If this was Dong Xiaoqing's killer, then he probably died right after receiving the payment. These fugitives always enjoy what they get right away. He may have offered it to the Buddha, but probably just for the night."

"Killed right after killing someone else." Luo Wenzhou sighed. "It's been just over a month. Let's hope the Ping'an District's security footage hasn't already been deleted. Go take a look. If they don't have it anymore, try nearby civilian cameras… We'll find something."

Tao Ran could tell that Luo Wenzhou was trying to imply something, and they exchanged glances. Shaking his head at Tao Ran, Luo Wenzhou looked back at the weapons. The hood and rubber gloves looked very familiar. In fact, he recognized them immediately: They'd been worn by that killer who'd passed right by him.

Luo Wenzhou walked slowly away from the reeking crime scene, tapping his cane lightly against the ground. He had a feeling that this could be the conclusive evidence they'd been waiting for.

He was right. A few days later, using DNA and photos, Xiao Haiyang found "Wang Xincheng's" real identity on their list of fugitives. His name

was actually Wang Li. He'd once been a long-haul trucker, but he'd gotten addicted to gambling and racked up a lot of debt. Deciding to risk it all, he'd killed the debt collector's entire family, then escaped into the night as a fugitive. After that, he'd somehow begun working in this business that required no startup capital.

Forensic testing determined that Wang Li's cause of death was poison. There was still beer in his stomach, so they concluded that he'd unknowingly drunk poisoned beer. There were traces of the poison and the beer on the floor in his apartment—Wang Li had probably knocked over the beer bottle in his death throes—but the police hadn't found the beer bottle that contained the poisoned beverage. They did find a half-full kettle in Wang Li's home, but not a single container that could have held hot water.

In other words, someone had knocked on Wang Li's door that night. That person had probably had his payment, which would have been why Wang Li treated them so well: Not only had he drunk the poisoned beer, he'd even poured his guest some hot water. The guest had held that cup of hot water and watched coldly as the stupid hit man fell to the floor, flailing helplessly until he stopped breathing. Then he stuffed Wang Li into the fridge, knowing that would dramatically delay the body being found, and that lots of the related evidence would disappear with time. When he left, he took the cup he'd used and the bottle of poisoned beer so that he could dispose of them.

Perfect—if that dumbass Wang Li hadn't left a hit list under his pillow, and if the poisoner's ceramic cup hadn't had a lid.

As Wang Li flailed, that lid had fallen to the floor along with the beer bottle. The cheap lid had shattered, and the poisoner took the pieces with them—but they were in such a rush that they didn't notice the last shard under the couch.

That shard had Zheng Kaifeng's fingerprints on it.

At this point, all the evidence had lined itself up neatly before the police, as though an invisible hand had strung together the entire sequence of events.

Zhou Junmao and Zheng Kaifeng had once helped one another in a foreign country. The former gave the latter his patronage in gratitude and

received a life of repayment in return. Using just that simple description, someone could've shot a classic movie about them.

Unfortunately, its plot wasn't a tale of two men in the same boat, or of two birds of a feather flocking together. Rather, it was two pieces of garbage teaming up in a trash can.

Thirty-eight years ago, Zhou Junmao had seduced his cousin's wife and caused his cousin, Zhou Yahou, to die of a heart attack. Working together, he and Zheng Kaifeng made their first blood-soaked fortune.

Twenty-one years ago, the Zhou Group had entered the Chinese market, playing the same trick and killing the roadblock that prevented them from acquiring Chinese brands. Dong Qian and his wife were innocents who became collateral damage. And although Dong Qian lost his wife, he never learned the truth. He lived as a regular person, sad and helpless, not realizing that the devil had already written down his name.

Zhou Junmao and Zheng Kaifeng were a golden pair who'd cheat or flip the chessboard whenever it suited them. They ran roughshod over laws and regulations again and again, getting the things they wanted without any obstructions, and they inevitably grew addicted to the feeling of invincibility.

At last, the honeymoon period ended. Zheng Kaifeng and Zhou Junmao began to have different goals.

At that point, the dream was over, and they drew their swords against each other. Zheng Kaifeng brought up the incident from twenty-one years ago and instrumentalized Yang Bo, whom he believed was Zhou Junmao's bastard son. He and Yang Bo collaborated to kill the Zhou Group head who had enjoyed a lifetime of glory. Zhou Junmao's death was like a rock producing thousands of ripples on water. Each of the crown princes—whether legitimate or false—harbored his own motive and put on the performance of his life.

Zheng Kaifeng had initially thought that he could close in slowly on his prey, but his murder weapon, Dong Qian, did something unexpected. Then Dong Xiaoqing tried to kill Zhou Huaijin and accidentally killed Zhou Huaixin. She was hurriedly silenced, and Zhou Huaijin was questioned by the police that same day.

Justice, it seemed, was slowly self-correcting, and it wasn't letting any criminals escape. The secret from twenty-one years ago came out under the light of the sun.

Zheng Kaifeng fled when he heard the news. Cash in hand, he'd knocked on the door of Dong Xiaoqing's murderer, and then killed the hit man with a bottle of strong poison. After that, he went to pick up Yang Bo so that they could get away. What he didn't anticipate was being ambushed in the hotel's parking garage. With no other choice, Zheng Kaifeng played his final trick.

Dying with Yang Bo.

For regular business partners, there were only a few steps between mutual benefit and mutual destruction. It seemed as though irregular partners somehow couldn't escape that fate either.

Now, all the main parties involved were dead. As for the smaller details—like the identities of the mysterious delivery person who'd brought the package to Dong Qian, the cyclist following Dong Xiaoqing, the Dong residence's arsonist, and the dumbass who'd texted the police to challenge them—those were secrets that the dead had carried to their graves. The police could only refer to them as "Zheng Kaifeng's lackeys," like the private bodyguards they'd arrested from his truck.

That was the heavy final word on those six lives.

Those six lives were like six icebergs, ramming into the international "Titanic" that was the Zhou Group. And so, with murder, money laundering, and cross-border crimes, this generational legend was facing its sunset, desolately sinking into the sea of time.

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FEI DU TOOK HIS PHONE off speaker. Tao Ran was on the other end; he'd had been filling Fei Du in on the progress of the case. "Thanks, Ge," he said. "I got it."

Over a month, Fei Du had gone from immobility to finally being able to move somewhat. He still couldn't quite walk, but he could at least sit up and talk. His official caretaker had been asked to leave so that Fei Du could entertain a visitor: Zhou Huaijin. The man looked even more haggard than Fei Du, who'd nearly been blown to smithereens. He sat to one side stiffly; after hearing everything, he was completely still, not saying anything for a long time.

"That's about it," Fei Du said, leaning forward slightly in his wheelchair. "I'm sure you're tired of hearing this, Mr. Zhou, but let me say it again: I'm so sorry for your loss."

Zhou Huaijin squeezed his eyes closed. Through his rimless glasses, Fei Du's own eyes silently skinned Zhou Huaijin alive.

"Actually," he added, "I still don't understand something. Why did Zheng Kaifeng wait so long to kill your father?"

"Zhou…" Zhou Huaijin's voice came out extremely hoarse. He cleared his throat. "Zhou Junmao's health hadn't been very good for the last few years, and during a checkup last year, they found a shadow in his chest. It turned out to be nothing, but the experience was still a huge blow to him. He mentioned his will a number of times over the last two years. Huaixin must've mentioned that to you."

Zhou Huaixin had indeed chattered about it when he called the police. Fei Du nodded slightly.

Zhou Huaijin smiled, looking bitter. "He didn't recognize me as his son, so I knew he'd never leave anything to me. Huaixin would get everything. You know Huaixin—he was always smart, but he didn't have what it took to continue a business. Especially not a shady business like this one."

He didn't need to elaborate; Fei Du understood. In his later years, Zhou Junmao had finally remembered the existence of his incompetent son, and that that son wouldn't be able to handle the complexities of the Zhou Group. Thus, he'd wanted to help Zhou Huaixin clean up his business and slowly withdrew from the illegal areas.

He had betrayed Zheng Kaifeng, who'd crawled out of the mud with him.

Zhou Huaijin looked down and rubbed his eyes, then rose to say goodbye. “Thank you, Fei-zong. I’ll let you get back to resting.”

Fei Du shook his head. “What are your plans for the future, Mr. Zhou?”

Zhou Huaijin smiled bitterly. “I don’t really have any. I have to go back and cooperate with the investigation into the Zhou Group.”

“You don’t have any decision-making powers, and you didn’t participate in illegal activities. Technically, you were one of the victims,” said Fei Du. “Don’t worry. You wouldn’t typically end up being implicated.”

“That’s reassuring,” said Zhou Huaijin. “Thanks.”

“Still, I’m confused.” Fei Du tapped the arm of his wheelchair lightly with his uninjured hand, looking up at Zhou Huaijin. “Zhou-xiong—you don’t mind if I call you that, right? You and your brother…your family… your mother… I suddenly feel like all this tragedy started when Zhou Junmao decided out of the blue that you weren’t his, without even doing a DNA test to confirm. I never managed to wrap my head around that.”

Zhou Huaijin went still.

“There are still a lot of mysteries in this case. I’ll talk about the thing I find the hardest to believe: that Zheng Kaifeng would blow himself up if he was at the end of his rope. You’d known him ever since you were little, Zhou-xiong. Do you think he’s that kind of martyr?”

“You mean…” Zhou Huaijin said, frowning.

“And Yang Bo,” Fei Du continued. “None of you guys thought Yang Bo was capable of anything great. Everyone found it suspicious that he snagged the position of board secretary. What exactly did Zheng Kaifeng see in someone so mediocre? He involved Yang Bo when he killed Zhou Junmao, and he felt compelled to take him along when he tried to escape. Don’t you think that’s weird?”

At those words, Zhou Huaijin’s bloodshot eyes slowly widened.

“This is probably as far as our investigations will go. All the transactions that happened abroad really are beyond our reach.” Fei Du stared at Zhou Huaijin and said, giving each word time to sink in, “Zhou-

xiong, what if Zheng Kaifeng was just a pawn for someone else who was behind all this? Have you considered that possibility?”

Zhou Huaijin looked at him, shocked.

“You know how to contact me. And I doubt the only thing your mother locked away in a safe for her entire life to threaten Zhou Junmao with was heart medication. What do you think?” Fei Du blinked at Zhou Huaijin mildly and then adopted a softer tone. “I hope Huaixin can rest peacefully. I liked his paintings. Come on—I’ll walk you out.”

Zhou Huaijin left the hospital dispirited. He wasn’t even in the frame of mind to turn down the half-paralyzed patient’s courteous offer. Fei Du was watching him get into his car before a chilly smile finally tugged at his lips. He slowly turned the electric wheelchair around and rolled back to his hospital room, deep in thought…until he spotted a woman standing outside the room.

She was clearly aging, but that didn’t affect her beauty at all. She wore a dark-gray Chanel-style ensemble, and even Fei Du couldn’t resist taking an extra, appreciative look at the little silk scarf wrapped around her neck. From what he could see from behind, her silhouette could even be described as slender and graceful.

She was holding flowers and food containers in her hands and was peering into Fei Du’s room.

Fei Du rolled over slowly to greet her, assuming that she had the wrong room. “Hello.”

When he spoke, the woman turned around and gave him a once-over.

Fei Du paused. Young beauties were common, but a middle-aged beauty was a rare sight indeed. He instinctively mustered his powers of flirtation and said politely, “Did you get lost looking for the room you’re visiting, miss?”

She seemed to pause at the way Fei Du addressed her; he hadn’t used a term meant for someone older.

“With you standing here in front of it, I feel like my room is glowing.” Fei Du steered his wheelchair into his room and picked a flower from a bouquet that someone had given him. “I’m pretty familiar with this

hospital’s inpatient area. Where are you trying to go? May I have the honor of escorting you?”

Epilogue

AS SOON AS FEI DU started eating regular food, his fussy nature showed itself. He immediately disliked the hospital's plain dishes; in fact, he wanted to move to a private hospital with a view and hire a cook. He could summon his beautiful assistants there to chat and ask them to run errands as needed; he could have his injuries treated and remain on-site for the subsequent physiotherapy. Either way, he wasn't worried about getting his hospital fees reimbursed.

Unfortunately, for the moment, Fei Du was weak. Even speaking was difficult. Before he could articulate this perfect plan, Luo Wenzhou had already made the relevant decisions on his behalf.

"You don't like the meals?" he said. "All right—I'll make your food myself and send it over. You have so many issues. How come you're so tough to take care of?"

Fei Du could only tactfully remind Luo Wenzhou that he himself was still limping, and it wouldn't do for him to ask an injured party to work.

Luo Wenzhou nodded, but then rejected Fei Du's input. "You don't need to worry about that," he said with finality. "It's decided."

Luo Wenzhou was a good cook, but he wasn't at *MasterChef* level: He could only prepare normal homemade meals. For some reason, though, Fei Du obediently stayed at his current hospital for those exact regular home-cooked dishes.

Thinking back on that, Fei Du himself couldn't make heads or tails of it.

He could only conclude that it was because he'd never gotten a "free lunch" before in his life.

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IN THE POLICE'S EYES, the Zhou case was over. The financial investigation was still ongoing, however, and the subsequent follow-up tasks were very complicated. Luo Wenzhou had been incredibly busy since he returned to work, and today's meetings seemed never-ending. He could really have done with a clone. Since he was so busy, he could only ask Mrs. Mu Xiaoqing to keep an eye on the pot and Luo Yiguo at home, then make the trip to the hospital.

Before leaving, he specifically told Tao Ran to give Fei Du a heads-up.

Unfortunately, when Tao Ran called, Fei Du responded, "I'm putting you on speaker, Ge. Zhou-zong is here. He wants to ask you a few things."

Tao Ran, whose concentration was like a compass, immediately transitioned into work mode; he forgot everything related to Luo Wenzhou's mom and taking food to the hospital. After hanging up, he did feel a little confused, as though he'd forgotten something. But after mulling it over, he confirmed that he'd said everything he was supposed to and hadn't said anything unnecessary, so he gradually shrugged his confusion off to focus on writing his report.

Which was how this tragedy occurred…

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MU XIAOQING LOOKED at the living, breathing Fei Du in front of her. For a few seconds, she thought she might've actually gone to the wrong room.

The last time she'd seen Fei Du, he'd just been wheeled out of the ICU, unconscious and with a deathly pallor to his face. His arms had been full of tubes, and so skinny she could nearly see bone. All his exposed skin was covered in bandages, like he was a piece of ceramic that the slightest touch would shatter. Even unconscious, he still knit his brows tightly together, as though he was silently enduring agony that not even sleep could hide. He'd truly looked like a pitiful creature.

Later, Mu Xiaoqing learned that Fei Du could've come out with nothing but a few scrapes and bruises if he'd hidden behind the car. He'd only ended up in this sad state because he was protecting her son. Looking at Fei Du's handsome face, she imagined a whole story about a beautiful, infatuated young man lured away by a terrible thug. Every day, she came to peek into Fei Du's hospital room and felt motherly love pour out of her.

So, after Fei Du woke up, Luo Wenzhou had used "We haven't decided to go official, and we aren't at the point where we can meet each other's parents. If you guys come, it'll seem too serious—I'm afraid he'll feel pressured" as an excuse to keep them from visiting Fei Du. Mu Xiaoqing had actually believed him—but now she was meeting the real Fei Du, and it was a shock to realize that her imagination had run away with her.

Still being largely incapacitated didn't affect Fei-zong's ability to flirt. He wore a dark-gray sweater over his hospital clothes, his hair was neat and tidy, and a pair of rimless glasses perched on his nose. Before he said a word, a hint of a smile was glinting in his peach-blossom eyes. The cold lenses of his glasses magnified his aura into something powerful and mysterious, almost otherworldly—he seemed completely unlike the poor thing on the bed before.

He was so different from what Luo Wenzhou had said!

"Oh, thank you. The inpatient area is indeed a bit confusing." Having taken stock of the young man, Mu Xiaoqing glanced up at his room number. Confirming—for the third time—that this was the right room, she asked, "Do you know a guy named Luo Wenzhou?"

Fei Du's previously smooth smile stiffened a little. A bad feeling came over him. "Hm? I guess you could say he's a colleague of mine," he said, very carefully. "Sorry, you are…?"

Mu Xiaoqing thoroughly savored the words "colleague of mine." With all her worldly experience, she didn't feel any hidden meaning behind those words.

Were the youth of today this calm and unblushing while in love?

Regardless, she let out an "oh" and nodded understandingly. No wonder it had taken Luo Wenzhou this long to let her bring a meal—and

that he'd had so much to say beforehand, warning Mu Xiaoqing not to touch on this or that, as if Fei Du were a rare, shy specimen.

It turned out Luo Wenzhou had just been boasting of his own accord outside the ICU that day!

Having figured this out, Mu Xiaoqing was overjoyed. She felt as though she'd discovered Luo Wenzhou's little secret and now had the upper hand.

After looking around, she set down the food and flowers she held, not behaving like a stranger at all. "I'm his neighbor," she told Fei Du gently. "He said that he'd be busy today and couldn't find time to visit you. My husband also happens to be in the hospital now, so Luo Wenzhou asked me to bring you some food. Your coworker brings you food every day? He treats you so well!"

Fei Du was extremely sensitive to minute changes in people's facial expressions, and he was becoming more and more concerned that something was going on with this middle-aged beauty. Thus, he just made a noncommittal noise to agree with her statement that Luo Wenzhou treated him well, then changed the subject. "Thank you. You say you're already married, though? What a pity."

Mu Xiaoqing knew that he was just flattering her. Still, as she looked at Fei Du's beautiful features, his insincere words felt good. She smiled. "You've got a way with words, you brat. But my son's as tall as a utility pole now!"

From her description, Fei Du thought he sounded rather…healthy and strong.

Mrs. Mu Xiaoqing's heart was the size of the Pacific Ocean, big enough to engulf Asia instantly. Although she was momentarily shocked by how different Fei Du was from the man she'd imagined, she recovered quickly. Her imagination had passed the edges of the solar system, but she swiftly reined it in, returning to reality at the speed of light. Then she happily began investigating Fei Du's background.

Fei Du hadn't known that the good neighbors of China were *this* friendly now. He wasn't overwhelmed, per se, but he wasn't quite prepared for this mother-in-law-style interrogation. He was still reeling from the

battle of wits he’d just had with Zhou Huaijin. More importantly, he felt like he’d made a mistake earlier…

Finally, Mu Xiaoqing rose to leave. While her back was turned, Fei Du immediately looked down to send Luo Wenzhou a text: *Who did you send my food with?* Then, maintaining his carefree smile, he opened the door for Mu Xiaoqing from his electric wheelchair. “What department is your husband staying in? I’ll take you to the nearest entrance.”

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Cheerful from their conversation, Mu Xiaoqing had forgotten the story she'd made up earlier. "The foot department," she responded, going with her first impulse.

Fei Du's face went blank. "Huh…?"

"Uh, no—I don't think that exists," Mu Xiaoqing said. "Um, what was it? The limb department? Leg department? Where do people with foot fungus stay?"

Fei Du's bad feeling intensified. This beautiful woman's mouth never stopped talking—as though it had been produced by the same DNA as Luo Wenzhou's.

"Come with me." Fei Du led her toward the main entrance, hoping at the last minute to establish a "gentle, polite, frugal, and generous" image that would replace her previous impression of him. He insisted on taking the elevator downstairs with her, then saw her all the way to the door as though he was seeing off the empress dowager. "Just continue straight."

Mu Xiaoqing smiled. "You don't need to come any farther. Why did you suddenly get so polite?"

Fei Du gave her a very proper smile. "It's only right."

At that moment, his phone vibrated on his knee. Glancing down, Fei Du saw that the busy Luo Wenzhou had spared him two words: *My mom.*

In the fierce early winter wind, Fei-zong silently broke out in a sweat. "Take care, Auntie."

Mu Xiaoqing sighed. "I was 'miss' for less than half an hour before I turned back into an auntie."

Fei Du maintained his expression with great difficulty. "It was… because you look so young," he said, polite and "shy." "I made a mistake. My apo—"

Mu Xiaoqing only wanted to hear the first half; happily ignoring his formal apology, she cut him off. "I love chatting with you. I haven't received any flowers from a little cutie in years. You haven't even gotten Luo Wenzhou any, have you?" Before Fei Du could react, she added something even more terrifying. "Ha ha ha! I have to go show it off to my husband!"

Flower in hand, she floated away without a care in the world. If Fei Du could, he might've fallen to his knees.

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BETWEEN MEETINGS, Luo Wenzhou remembered Fei Du's text. Worried that Mu Xiaoqing had said something weird—she had no filter—he called Fei Du back. "What happened?"

"Nothing," Fei Du said in a weird tone. "Shixiong, I love you."

From Fei Du's mouth, the words "I love you" were about as special as "Have you eaten?"—but they still made Luo Wenzhou, who rarely got to hear anything good come out of that mouth, run straight into the water dispenser.

That night, Luo Wenzhou received a straightforward but passionate bouquet at work. Its strong fragrance instantly made him suspect that Fei Du had done something to betray him. But what was Fei Du capable of in his current condition? Even if he wanted to get up to something, he was strong in mind but weak in body. That thought reassured Luo Wenzhou, so he went ahead and put the flowers in his study at home. Luo Yiguo wanted to come in and see the bouquet for himself, but Luo Wenzhou cruelly locked him out of the room, then began whistling happily.

Mrs. Mu Xiaoqing now had ammunition against both men, so both felt guilty, and things became a lot more peaceful between them.

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FINALLY—OVER A MONTH LATER, when it snowed for the first time that year—Luo Wenzhou was no longer limping, and Fei Du was discharged from the hospital. When Luo Wenzhou came to pick him up, the heat in his car was turned up too high, and Fei Du accidentally dozed off.

When Luo Wenzhou patted him awake, Fei Du realized he didn't recognize their surroundings.

"We're five minutes from my house," Luo Wenzhou said. "Wake up, or you'll catch a cold from the wind."

"From your house?" Fei Du repeated, feeling like he was still dreaming. He paused for a long time; then his brain finally caught up. "Why am I going to your house?" he asked, confused.

Luo Wenzhou stared at the road ahead, doing his best to look as though the answer was obvious. "Well, have you got anyone to take care of you at home?"

"I—"

Fei Du wanted to say that he could take care of himself, and that even if he couldn't, he could afford to hire someone. Luo Wenzhou interrupted him, though. "That's that, then. I've already prepared all your daily necessities. For now, I'll drop you off, and you can look to see whether anything's missing. If so, write me a list."

Fei Du, seemingly thinking of something else, tacitly accepted this agreement. At the same time, he unconsciously licked his lips.

He'd been to Luo Wenzhou's place twice. It was a thousand square feet with three bedrooms and two common areas, plus a basement. For a single man, that was way too big, but a cat could enjoy life to the fullest in there. When he pushed open the door, Fei Du was struck by the warmth of the heating and the fragrance of cooked meat from the kitchen. As he came in from the frozen outdoors, the smell of home wrapped itself around him, melting him completely.

Comrade Luo Yiguo didn't have enough revolutionary integrity to make him trustworthy, so Luo Wenzhou had locked him in the bathroom before leaving to protect the chicken in the kitchen. Luo Yiguo was furious about this arrangement. As soon as he heard the handle of the bathroom door click, he began to scratch at the door in earnest, yowling and primed to pounce and scratch his poop-scooper's face as soon as the door opened.

Before he managed to get anywhere, though, Luo Yiguo smelled a stranger. Six feet from Fei Du's feet, he slammed on the brakes and stared up at the newcomer with big, round eyes. Then he immediately turned tail

and escaped back to his temporary jail, where he hid silently behind the door, his round eyes peeking out.

Fei Du was like a house-guardian deity. As soon as he'd arrived, the cat no longer dared jump on the dinner table. For once, Luo Wenzhou could enjoy a meal without keeping his eyes and ears open for trouble. The serenity almost made him emotional. Even more moving was the fact that Fei Du didn't start a single fight. Not only did he have no complaints about Luo Wenzhou bringing him home without raising the possibility with him first, he was quite agreeable. In fact, he agreed to everything Luo Wenzhou said, and even temporarily suppressed his pickiness—he offered no criticisms of the things Luo Wenzhou had cooked for him.

Of course, Fei Du could never behave for more than three seconds.

Luo Wenzhou usually slept in the guest bedroom. It and its bathroom were the closest to the door. Thus, if he woke up late in the morning, he could remove the cat from his face, get dressed, wash up, and shoot out the door in two minutes. Therefore, he treated the master bedroom as the guest bedroom and went in there to lay out fresh bedding for Fei Du—so Fei Du clearly misunderstood his intentions.

Before Luo Wenzhou could straighten up, a familiar, woodsy scent announced itself from behind his back. Then he was hugged from behind. One very misbehaving hand hooked around his waist, and the other brushed lightly over his neck and then pressed its fingers against his lips. Fei Du followed this by blowing into Luo Wenzhou's ear.

Luo Wenzhou's brain went blank, and without his permission, half his body erupted into flames. As he grabbed Fei Du's wrist, even he thought his palms felt embarrassingly hot.

"Enough," Luo Wenzhou said, elbowing him.

Fei Du had noticed a long time ago that Luo Wenzhou was particularly weak for wood-based male scents, especially when only the base notes remained, so when he was discharged from the hospital, he'd specifically asked his assistant to bring him a bottle. Now, pretending not to notice the weak attempt at resistance, he just allowed Luo Wenzhou to grab his wrist—then he licked the back of Luo Wenzhou's neck. "You're so faux-respectable, Shixiong."

Luo Wenzhou shivered, falling forward onto the covers as Fei Du knocked against the backs of his knees.

Fei Du's freshly washed hair was wet; droplets formed at the ends of the strands. In the bedside lamp's dim light, those droplets glistened in different colors, dazzling Luo Wenzhou. A few beads of water conjoined into a drop and suddenly fell. Luo Wenzhou's throat bobbed with the movement.

"But I love how faux-respectable people like you flirt with danger," Fei Du added with a hint of a smile. "You guys are always so tasty."

"Fuck off." Luo Wenzhou felt like he'd been possessed by a traditional Chinese medicinal supplement—he was burning up on the inside. Still, he gritted his teeth and reached out to push Fei Du away. "Are you trying to die right after getting out of the hospital?"

Another thing Fei Du had noticed long ago was that his enemy's resistance was rather half-hearted. He didn't move to evade Luo Wenzhou's push, and as he expected, Luo Wenzhou just pawed at him lightly, using about as much force as Luo Yiguo could have. When Fei Du didn't back away, Luo Wenzhou's hand against his chest seemed to take on a different meaning. It didn't feel like he was resisting Fei Du, but rather like Luo Wenzhou was actually taking advantage of the moment to feel him up.

He happened to feel Fei Du's heartbeat. The hospital staff had told him that Fei Du's heart stopped at one point. When Fei Du had first come out of the ICU, Luo Wenzhou had listened and listened to his heartbeat, swearing that when that slow, weak pulse regained its vigor, he'd let Fei Du do anything he wanted… Now Fei Du's heartbeat was lively once more, and Luo Wenzhou felt a little regret. He almost wanted to go back in time and take back that statement.

While Luo Wenzhou was lost in his thoughts, Fei Du suddenly leaned in. Every muscle in Luo Wenzhou's body tensed, and he held his breath.

First, Fei Du's mouth touched the corner of the other man's lips, featherlight. Then he said in a soft, slightly nasal voice, as though sighing, "Dying in your arms would be a beautiful ending."

Luo Wenzhou really didn't want to hear the word "die." "Stop—" he said, his tone changing abruptly.

But his scolding didn’t make it out fully before Fei Du sealed his lips shut. This time, a lemon scent invaded Luo Wenzhou’s lips—the new toothpaste he had bought.

Fei Du revealed just how nimble his tongue was by giving Luo Wenzhou a demonstration on how to tie a cherry stem with it. For all Luo Wenzhou’s insistence that he wasn’t thinking any impure thoughts, Fei Du stirred him up into a pot of congee, and finally the last of Luo Wenzhou’s brain cells evaporated. By the time he recovered his wits, he was kissing Fei Du back, unable to rein himself in any longer. He clutched Fei Du’s back unconsciously as his hands broke free of his brain’s control, and other organs took over as he felt all over Fei Du’s body…until he accidentally touched the back of Fei Du’s injured shoulder.

The pain of having his injury touched made Fei Du flinch. He truly was a man, though—in the service of certain unspeakable goals, he managed to take it, not making a single sound.

Still, that snapped Luo Wenzhou out of it instantly, and he found himself exasperated. He abruptly flipped them over, pressing Fei Du into the soft blanket.

Before Fei Du could even react, something cold encircled his wrist. There was a click as his left hand was handcuffed to the bed.

Luo Wenzhou tried to calm his racing heartbeat. He stretched out his stiff neck, his expression serious. “Behave.”

Fei Du turned his head to the side and shook his wrist. The handcuffs made a crisp, clean noise, and he smiled easily. “You want to start with something this exciting?” This faux-respectable man’s taste really was top-notch. His reputation didn’t lie.

But Luo Wenzhou rolled his eyes at Fei Du, then raked back his own messy hair impatiently. He stood and pulled the blanket from underneath Fei Du, then shook it out. In a few easy movements, he’d wrapped the elegant Fei-zong into a burrito and flicked him on the forehead.

Fei Du was speechless. Luo Wenzhou patted the top of the blanket sternly. “Sleep.”

For a moment, Fei-zong all but froze, pulling at the arm cuffed to the bed. “You want me to *sleep* like this, Luo Wenzhou?”

Luo Wenzhou considered it, and decided that Fei Du was right—this was indeed unsuitable. He left to grab a hair dryer, then turned it on to its highest setting and aimed it right at Fei-zong’s sexy, dripping head.

Hearing the familiar sound of the hair dryer, Luo Yiguo peeked through the crack in the door, only to see his poop scooper committing non-cat abuse. Suddenly filled with terror at the thought that he would be next, he hastened to leap to his toe beans and silently fled.

Luo Wenzhou often dried Luo Yiguo after bathing him, so he was an old hand at this chore. In under five minutes, he’d taken care of Fei-zong’s precious hair. He scrunched a random handful of Fei Du’s long, messy tresses, then moved to switch off the bedside lamp. “All right. Now you can sleep.”

Fei Du reached out quickly with his only free hand and grabbed Luo Wenzhou. “I’m sorry, Shixiong. Let me go. I promise to behave.”

Luo Wenzhou looked at him expressionlessly. The living room TV was rerunning comedy sketches, and an amusingly appropriate line floated in through the crack in the door: “We’re both sly old foxes here! Do you really think you can trick me with your made-up stories?!”

Fei Du stared at Luo Wenzhou. Luo Wenzhou stared back.

Suddenly, the absurdity of this strange background noise, and this strange situation, struck them. They both started laughing at the same time.

Not knowing whether to keep laughing or begin crying, Fei Du fell back into the pillow. It was very soft, with a slight sweet scent. Maybe Luo Wenzhou had sprayed something to help him sleep, or maybe he’d just tired himself out, but as soon as his head hit the pillow, his eyelids began to close. He raised his free hand under the gentle light of the bedside lamp and asked muddily, eyes half closed, “Why did you bring me to your house?”

Luo Wenzhou sat silently by the bed for a while. “I want to take care of you. Can’t I?”

Fei Du paused. His almost-closed eyes silently opened again. “Didn’t you just take care of me for two months in the hospital?” He’d even eaten all the fruit that other people had brought.

Luo Wenzhou turned to look at him. “Do you think I’m taking care of you because you blocked a bomb for me?” Before Fei Du could respond, Luo Wenzhou slapped him through the blanket. “Asshole.”

Every slight movement made the handcuffs clink. His head full of hair that was soft and fluffy thanks to Luo Wenzhou’s blow-drying, Fei Du looked at the sergeant exasperatedly, unsure which of them was the asshole.

A sudden thought came to Luo Wenzhou. “That day we went to capture Zheng Kaifeng, what was the personal question you wanted to ask me?”

Fei Du thought about it, then covered his eyes with his hand. “I forgot it while I was in the hospital. Let me think of one right now… What’s your favorite position?”

“That’s not what you wanted to ask,” Luo Wenzhou said with certainty. Then, just when Fei Du thought that the sergeant would skip the question, Luo Wenzhou for some reason answered seriously: “I like positions where I’m facing my partner and can see their face clearly. Testing me with such a question is pointless. Are you this heartless in business deals as well, Fei-zong? And your company hasn’t gone bankrupt yet? How about I give you another shot at exchanging secrets?”

With Luo Wenzhou forcing the sale, Fei Du couldn’t refuse. Under the lamp’s warm glow, he fell silent for a while, then said, “All right. Let me tell you something. Last time, we talked about Xu Wenchao—that guy kidnapping and killing little girls. He was getting rid of their bodies in an area that belonged to a company under the Bright Foundation’s umbrella. A project in that area kept getting delayed because it hadn’t been approved, so it’s become an abandoned, and therefore safe, cemetery. That’s the part you already knew. Let me tell you something you don’t.”

Luo Wenzhou raised a brow.

“That project proposal once ended up in Fei Chengyu’s hands. The Bright Foundation wanted him to invest in it, but Fei Chengyu refused on

the grounds that it didn’t have a well-established method of generating profits.”

Fei Chengyu was Fei Du’s father. Fei Du spoke his full name bluntly in a voice that held a barely perceptible coldness.

Not having a “well-established method of generating profits” didn’t sound unusual, but Luo Wenzhou heard something terrifying in Fei Du’s words. He unconsciously sat up straighter. “Your dad has a connection with the Bright Foundation?”

“They used to be close business partners.” Fei Du held up two fingers, signaling that there was a second problem. “And I found *this* out after I took over the company: At one point, Fei Chengyu was donating tons of money to a charitable fund under the Bright Foundation. Early on, the Fei Corporation wasn’t well-organized, so it’s difficult to look up old transactions. But from what I can find in the remaining records, the Bright Foundation has a long history, yet almost none of their projects returned any profit.”

The corner of Luo Wenzhou’s eye twitched.

“I understood Fei Chengyu. He was very greedy, and very sharp and cold about it.” Fei Du spoke slowly, as though each word was heavy enough to get stuck in his throat. “All the projects that the Bright Foundation proposed back then seemed absurd. It was clear that they’d all lose money. There must have been some reason Fei Chengyu fell for it time and again.”

Luo Wenzhou considered that for a while. “Is there anything else?”

“No.” Fei Du shrugged. “Do you think it’s easy for a nepo baby to survive in the complex corporation he left behind? It took me nearly two years just to access the central, top-secret files.” *Openly and covertly, I got rid of an army’s worth of obstacles.*

Swallowing that last sentence, Fei Du pretended to look excited. He sat up slightly to lean against the headboard. “My turn. Do you—”

Luo Wenzhou put a finger to Fei Du’s lips. “Do you want to mull your question over? Don’t waste your chance. I can recount what we talked about that day in the car, if you don’t remember.”

Fei Du fell silent for a long time. His peach-blossom eyes, which usually seemed so frivolous, grew serious. After a while, he finally responded, “It’s my first time encountering such an enthusiastic participant.”

Luo Wenzhou stared forcefully into Fei Du’s eyes.

When Fei Du had wanted to pose a personal question to him in exchange for information, Luo Wenzhou could tell that he wasn’t entirely joking. At the time, he’d really wanted to ask what the question was, but he quickly decided not to. Then Zheng Kaifeng’s truck had just so happened to appear, giving Luo Wenzhou an out. If Fei Du had just wanted to make an inappropriate joke, he could’ve done so as they gave chase. Things hadn’t been so dire that they couldn’t speak.

The corners of Fei Du’s lips tensed almost imperceptibly.

Luo Wenzhou waited a while, his gaze darkening. Then he sighed. “All right,” he said. “Maybe you can tell me tomorrow.”

“I wanted to ask…” Fei Du began hastily, then smiled halfway through. “This question’s even more boring. If you didn’t keep mentioning it, I would’ve forgotten it. But back then, didn’t you say you’d be an asshole to suspect someone right after declaring your love to them? I wanted to ask *when* you’d declared your love. How did it go over my head?”

“It went over your head?” Luo Wenzhou raised an eyebrow. “I don’t think I said it all that subtly. You can infer intention just from punctuation. You’re telling me you didn’t pick up on it? Fei Du, do you really not know when I did that, or are you just pretending?” He sighed again, then reached out to rub Fei Du’s chin. “You also want to claim that you don’t know why my mom brought you food in the hospital, right?”

Fei Du didn’t reply.

Luo Wenzhou tilted the younger man’s chin up. “And that you came here with me today planning to sleep with me, right? You weren’t planning on *staying*.”

Fei Du still had nothing to say.

He was the one who’d started flirting first, and who’d kept testing the boundaries. But now that he’d been cornered like this, he didn’t know what to do, and instinctively wanted to run away.

Yet his instincts were one thing, and his heart was another. At odds with Luo Wenzhou, he didn’t know whether to proceed or back off. He could only freeze in place, panicked.

Luo Wenzhou snorted. “In your dreams,” he said, destroying one of Fei Du’s options.

He brought his own blanket over, threw it down next to Fei Du, and stuffed some cotton into Fei Du’s handcuffs. Then he turned off the lamp. “If you need to pee in the middle of the night, wake me up to uncuff you. Now go to sleep!”

THE STORY CONTINUES IN
Silent Reading
VOLUME 4

CHARACTER GUIDE & GLOSSARY

CHARACTER GUIDE

MAIN CHARACTERS

LUO WENZHOU (骆闻舟): Sergeant on Yancheng Municipal Public Security Bureau's criminal investigation team.

FEI DU (费渡): Rich young chairman of the Fei Corporation, which he inherited when his father suffered an accident that left him comatose.

SUPPORTING CHARACTERS

YANCHENG MUNICIPAL PUBLIC SECURITY BUREAU

TAO RAN (陶然): Deputy sergeant on criminal investigation team.

LANG QIAO (朗乔): Member of criminal investigation team. Also called "Er-Lang" and "Xiao-Qiao-er."

XIAO HAIYANG (肖海洋): New member of criminal investigation team. Transferred from Huashi District Bureau. Also called Little Four-Eyes and "Xiao-Xiao."

ZENG GUANGLING (曾广陵): Director specializing in forensics.

YANG ZHENGFENG (杨正锋): Luo Wenzhou and Tao Ran's late shifu. Sometimes called "Lao-Yang" or "Yang-lao."

ZHOU GROUP

ZHOU JUNMAO (周峻茂): Head of Zhou Group.

ZHENG KAIFENG (郑凯风): Right-hand man of Zhou Junmao.

ZHOU HUAIJIN (周怀瑾): Elder son of Zhou Junmao.

ZHOU HUAIXIN (周怀信): Younger son of Zhou Junmao.

YANG BO (杨波): High-ranking employee of Zhou Group. Protégé of Zheng Kaifeng. Believed to be Zhou Junmao's illegitimate son.

HU ZHENYU (胡震宇): High-ranking employee of Zhou Group. Friend of Zhou Huaijin's from college.

ZHOU YAHOU (周雅厚): Cousin of Zhou Junmao.

DONG FAMILY

DONG QIAN (董乾): Father of Dong Xiaoqing. Truck driver. Died in the car crash that killed Zhou Junmao.

DONG XIAOQING (董晓晴): Daughter of Dong Qian.

OTHERS

LUO YIGUO (骆一锅): Cat belonging to Luo Wenzhou, who likens the cat to Fei Du.

MU XIAOQING (穆小青): Mother of Luo Wenzhou.

LUO CHENG (骆诚): Father of Luo Wenzhou.

FEI CHENGYU (费承宇): Father of Fei Du.

OTHERS

LUO YIGUO (骆一锅): Cat belonging to Luo Wenzhou, who likens the cat to Fei Du.

MU XIAOQING (穆小青): Mother of Luo Wenzhou.

PREVIOUS CASES

BOOK I: JULIEN

VICTIM: He Zhongyi (何忠义)

CULPRIT: Zhao Haochang (赵浩昌)

HUASHI DISTRICT BUREAU: Huang Jinglian (黄敬廉), Wang Hongliang (王洪亮)

OTHER VICTIMS: Chen Yuan (陈媛), Chen Zhen (陈振)

The corpse of He Zhongyi, a young blue-collar worker from out of town, was found in a dodgy neighborhood. This led to the discovery that the police at the Huashi District Bureau, led by Wang Hongliang and his right-hand man Huang Jinglian, were involved in a drug-trafficking syndicate.

Zhao Haochang, a high-flying lawyer whom He Zhongyi looked up to as a child, had committed the murder. He then dumped the body at a drug-exchange point to discourage the district bureau from investigating He Zhongyi's death more thoroughly.

When the municipal bureau uncovered Zhao Haochang's habit of collecting "trophies" from his path out of poverty, he confessed to the murder and to his knowledge of police corruption.

Luo Wenzhou also received a report from Chen Zhen, a young man whose sister Chen Yuan was drugged and forced into sex work before her death from an overdose. Chen Zhen was later killed as well, but Chen Yuan's covertly recorded video footage—along with Zhao Haochang's hidden cameras at the drug-exchange point—helped bring the Huashi District Bureau's crimes to light.

BOOK II: HUMBERT HUMBERT

PRESENT DAY

VICTIMS: Qu Tong (曲桐), Zhang Yuchen (张雨晨)

CULPRITS: Su Luozhan (苏落盏), Xu Wenchao (许文超)

TWENTY YEARS AGO

VICTIMS: Guo Fei (郭菲) and others

CULPRITS: Su Hui (苏慧), Su Xiaolan (苏筱岚), Xu Wenchao (许文超)

When schoolgirl Qu Tong went missing during a bus hijacking, and Zhang Yuchen, the ten-year-old cousin of Tao Ran's crush, disappeared after an art class, a closed serial-kidnapping case was reopened after twenty years. Ultimately, the investigators uncovered a long-running child-trafficking operation.

One of the victims of the original case was named Guo Fei. Her father Guo Heng assisted in the discovery that Su Xiaolan—believed to be the only survivor of the original case—was actually an active participant in the kidnappings. She earned the trust of other victims and then brought them to her mother, Su Hui. When Su Xiaolan grew older, her role fell to her daughter Su Luozhan instead. The kidnapped victims were assaulted by the Su family's clients, then murdered and butchered by Xu Wenchao, who buried their bodies in a coastal area of Binhai.

Fei Du happened to discover that his now-comatose father once rejected a project proposal to develop that area.

NAME GUIDE

NAMES, HONORIFICS, AND TITLES

Diminutives, Nicknames, and Name Tags

-ER: Suffix meaning “son” or “child.” Affectionate diminutive. Usually applied to monosyllabic names, or one syllable of a multisyllabic name.

A-: Prefix. Friendly diminutive. Usually used with monosyllabic names, or one syllable of a multisyllabic name.

DA-: Prefix meaning “big” or “elder.” Can be added before an elder’s title, like “dage” or “dajie,” or before a name.

LAO-/-LAO: Prefix or suffix meaning “old.” Usually added to a surname and used in informal contexts. Can be used in an affectionate context; not always used literally.

XIAO-: Prefix meaning “little” or “younger.” Can be added before a junior’s title or name. Often used in affectionate or familiar contexts; not always used literally.

-ZONG: Suffix applied to names of CEOs or other high-ranking people.

-YE: Suffix meaning “lord.” Used to refer to someone respected and usually wealthy.

Family

DI/DIDI: “Younger brother.” Can be used to address a literal brother or unrelated male peer. Can also be used as a suffix.

GE/GEGE: “Elder brother.” Can be used to address a literal brother or unrelated male peer. Can also be used as a suffix.

JIE/JIEJIE: “Elder sister.” Can be used to address a literal sister or unrelated female peer. Can also be used as a suffix.

MEI/MEIMEI: “Younger sister.” Can be used to address a literal sister or unrelated female peer. Can also be used as a suffix.

XIONGDI: “Brother.” Can be attached as a suffix to address an unrelated male peer (in which case only “-xiong” may be used).

SHU: “Younger paternal uncle.” Can be used to address a literal uncle or unrelated older male peer. Can also be used as a suffix.

Social Standing and Seniority

LAOSHI: Term of respect for teachers and professionals.

SHIXIONG: “Martial brother.” In a modern context, can be used for an upperclassman or for someone else who studied under your teacher.

SHIFU: Term for one’s teacher, master, or mentor.

SHINIANG: The wife of one’s shifu.

Note that diminutives, nicknames, and name tags can be combined (“dashixiong,” “laoge,” etc.).

GLOSSARY

ADMINISTRATIVE DIVISIONS: The highest-level administrative divisions in the People's Republic of China (PRC) make up the **provincial level (省级, shengji)**. These divisions cover certain large municipalities like Beijing and Shanghai in addition to provinces. Yancheng is implied to be such a provincial-level city.

Provincial-level administrative divisions are subdivided into **prefectural-level (地级, diji)** divisions. Districts in large cities like Beijing and Shanghai fall into this category. Below the prefectural level is the **county level (县级, xianji)**, followed by the **township level (乡级, xiangji)**.

PUBLIC SECURITY: The main law-enforcement agency of the PRC is known as the **Ministry of Public Security (公安部, Gong'anbu)**. Police stations within the Ministry of Public Security are stratified according to the same system as administrative divisions:

PROVINCIAL LEVEL: Public Security Department (公安厅, Gong'anting)

MUNICIPAL LEVEL: Public Security Bureau (公安局, Gong'anju)

DISTRICT LEVEL: Public Security District Bureau (公安分局, Gong'anfenju)

SMALLER DIVISIONS: police stations (派出所, paichusuo)

In addition to fighting crime and maintaining order, police—especially those in smaller departments—manage residency and immigration records. Higher-level departments have more resources to deal with serious crimes.

About the Author
priest

An internationally renowned author who writes for the novel serialization website JJWXC. priest's books have inspired multimedia adaptations and been published in numerous languages around the world. priest is known for writing compelling drama that incorporates humor and creativity, and the grand sense of style that infuses her worldbuilding. Her works include *Stars of Chaos: Sha Po Lang*, *Guardian: Zhen Hun*, *Liu Yao: The Revitalization of Fuyao Sect*, *Silent Reading: Mo Du*, and *The Defectives*, among others.

Footnotes

Chapter 1

[1] A political event in which members of the Communist Party of China reflect on their performance and critique themselves and each other.

Chapter 2

[2] Sons of King Duncan in William Shakespeare's Macbeth.

Chapter 3

[3] Police who monitor domestic internet content and access.

[4] A reference to the first episode of Black Mirror.

Chapter 6

[5] Usually, this saying refers to "losing your wife" rather than "losing your father."

[6] The main character of a 1980s cartoon of the same name.

Chapter 7

[7] Housing provided by the government to residents of buildings that it will demolish in the near future.

Chapter 8

[8] A reference to the Ming dynasty novel Jin Ping Mei (金瓶梅). Ximen Qing is the novel's womanizing protagonist, and Li Ping'er is the

wife of his friend; they have an extramarital affair, then marry after Li Ping’er’s husband’s death.

Chapter 10

[9] A reference to Princess Returning Pearl, a popular historical drama about a long-lost princess looking to claim her rightful title.

[10] Fei Du and Zhou Huaijin are quoting William Shakespeare’s Macbeth.

Chapter 12

[11] From William Blake’s poem “Auguries of Innocence.”

Chapter 13

[12] Quote from the Daoist text Zhuangzi.

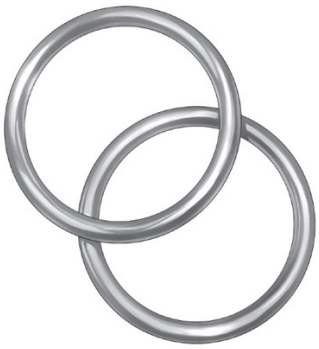
[13] A gang that smuggles people out of China.

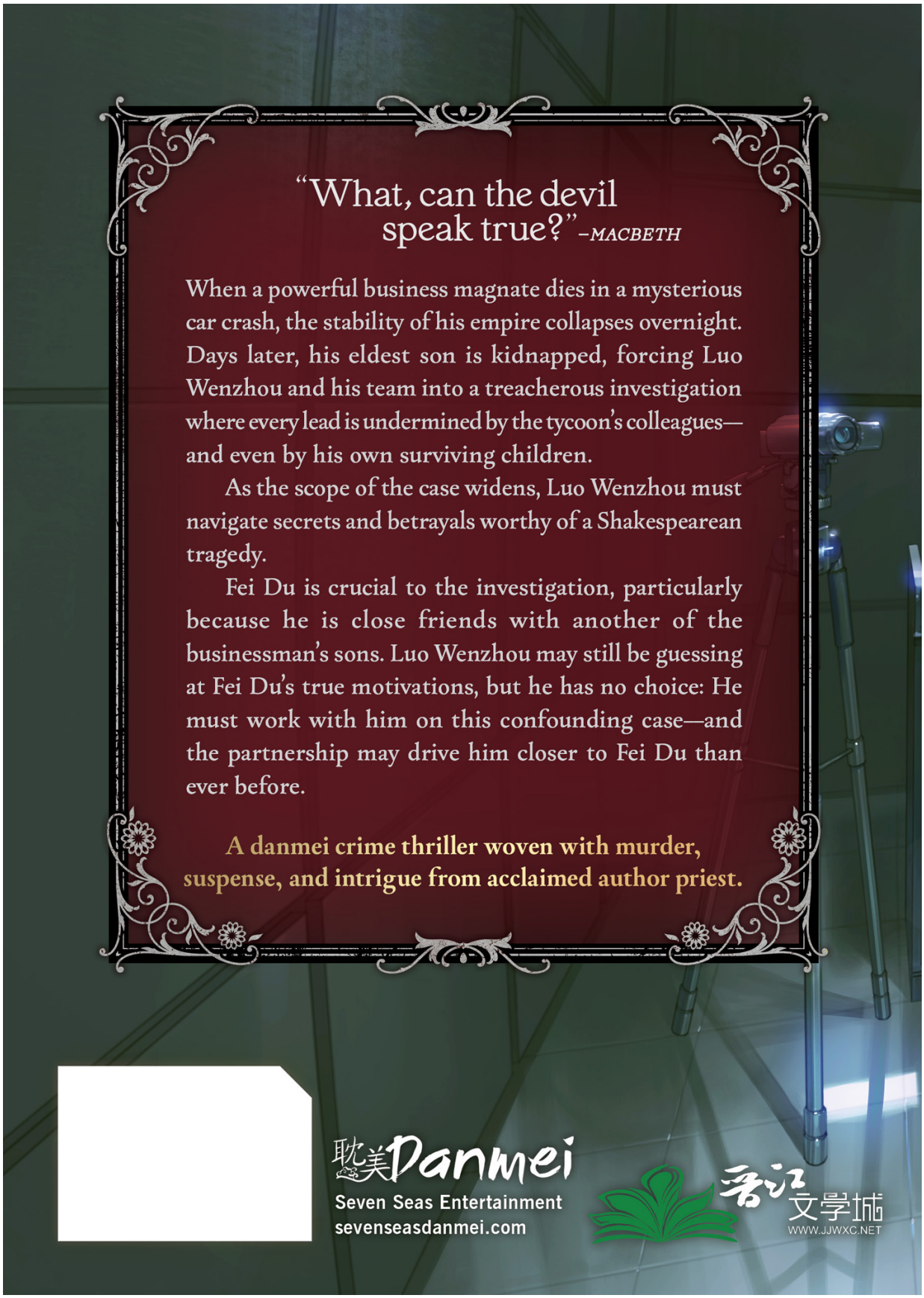
Chapter 16

[14] From Ernest Hemingway’s The Old Man and the Sea.

Chapter 17

[15] The main character of Léon: The Professional.





"What, can the devil speak true?" –*MACBETH*

When a powerful business magnate dies in a mysterious car crash, the stability of his empire collapses overnight. Days later, his eldest son is kidnapped, forcing Luo Wenzhou and his team into a treacherous investigation where every lead is undermined by the tycoon's colleagues—and even by his own surviving children.

As the scope of the case widens, Luo Wenzhou must navigate secrets and betrayals worthy of a Shakespearean tragedy.

Fei Du is crucial to the investigation, particularly because he is close friends with another of the businessman's sons. Luo Wenzhou may still be guessing at Fei Du's true motivations, but he has no choice: He must work with him on this confounding case—and the partnership may drive him closer to Fei Du than ever before.

A danmei crime thriller woven with murder, suspense, and intrigue from acclaimed author priest.

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